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## Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the mid-20th Century historico-biblical epic—a film genre that flourished within Hollywood from 1949 to 1966 and which took as its subject the depiction of the ancient world—and reads this body of films as a mode of historical engagement. I argue that the historico-biblical epic takes the pressure of the terrifying possibility of the end of human history engendered by the atomic bomb and transmutes this into a series of dialectics, between agency and powerlessness, embodiment and transcendence, desire and punishment, imperial zenith and nadir. While antiquity seems to offer the modern world the ability to escape from the traumas of World War II, the imminence of a nuclear Armageddon, and the possibility of no future, the epic renders visible and forces an encounter with the very terrors it promises and seeks to escape. As such, it presents a portrait of an uneasy American culture struggling, and never quite succeeding, to make sense of its own position in time and history.

Chapter one argues that the proliferation of atomic technologies in the postwar period engendered a profound eschatological fear in American culture, a fear reflected in the historico-biblical epic's concern with heroic agency and impotence. This chapter draws on a wide variety of historical documents, including contemporary newspapers and magazines, the works of public intellectuals, and thinkers in the Christian press, all of whom struggled to make sense of the possibility of the end of history and whether it could (or should) be prevented through human intervention. I argue that the epic, including films such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *Spartacus* (1960), takes this terror and sublimates it into an ongoing narrative tension between agency and powerlessness, in which the male hero remains enmeshed in forces that exist beyond his control, his agency constantly displaced onto larger forces such as the will of God or onto a future the films seem reluctant to visually represent.

Chapter two argues that the advent of widescreen, inaugurated with *The Robe* (1953), opened up new possibilities in the way in which the epic framed its temporal and embodied appeals and the way in which it sought to provide an escape from the terrors of modern history. Drawing on midcentury theological explorations of time, industrial and trade discussions of widescreen technology, as well as certain work on time and affect in recent film theory, I explore how the widescreen epic's emphasis on immersion and embodied presence suggests the ability to escape modernity and experience the fulfillment offered by redemptive Christian time. Simultaneously, the genre's emphasis on embodiment, both that of its on-screen, Christian convert heroes and the spectator sitting in the audience, draws attention to the limits of temporal transcendence.

In chapter three, I shift into a discussion of the use of color in epic films such as *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *Quo Vadis* (1951), arguing that color's sensory address, combined with the genre's emphasis on sexual and material excess, expresses a utopian wish to escape from the mesh of modern, linear time and escape into the perpetual present offered by sexual desire. Drawing on recent explorations undertaken in color theory and situating the films in the context of Cold War anxieties over sexuality, containment, and nuclear annihilation, I also show how the sexual excesses and deviance so conspicuously on display intertwine with the moralizing impulse of the films' narratives, conjoining the pleasures of desire and death. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how these films expose the fractures in the not-yet-hegemonic ideology of containment.

Chapter four moves into a discussion of imperial and geopolitical anxieties in later epics such as *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). These films provide a

conflicted experience of history, one founded on a form of what I call “melancholic utopia,” a hopeful mourning for a brighter future that the films never bring to fruition. In these films, the hero’s aspirations unfold via spectacular displays of armies, vistas, and material wealth, which emerge at key points to create moments in which time is suspended and seemingly filled with vast historical potential. However, these films’ narratives, driven toward failure, suffuse these time-stopping, utopian spectacles with the despair of inevitable historical decline. These films thus provide an experience of history that holds the promise of infinite possibility in productive tension with a deferral of such potential.

HISTORY'S PERILOUS PLEASURES: EXPERIENCING ANTIQUITY IN THE  
POSTWAR HOLLYWOOD EPIC

by

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B.A., Marshall University, 2007

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Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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## Table of Contents

List of Illustrative Materials.....	x
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1—The Metal in the Maker’s Hand: Atomic Anxiety, Impotent Agency, and the Futility of Epic Heroism.....	24
Chapter 2—The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh is Weak: Embodiment, Transcendence, and Widescreen Historical Spectatorship.....	78
Chapter 3—The (Un)Fortunate Fall into Color: Desire, Death, and the Technicolor Sex Drive.....	134
Chapter 4—Paradise Lost: Melancholic Utopia and the Experience of History in <i>Cleopatra</i> (1963) and <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	197
Conclusion.....	253
Notes.....	264
Filmography.....	279
Bibliography.....	280
Vita.....	304

## List of Illustrative Materials

### Chapter 1—The Metal in the Maker’s Hand: Atomic Anxiety, Impotent Agency, and Futility of Epic Heroism

Figure 1, screenshot from <i>The Ten Commandments</i> (1956).....	47
Figure 2, screenshot from <i>The Ten Commandments</i> (1956).....	48
Figure 3, screenshot from <i>Ben-Hur</i> (1959).....	55
Figure 4, screenshot from <i>Ben-Hur</i> (1959).....	57
Figure 5, screenshot from <i>Spartacus</i> (1960).....	74
Figure 6, screenshot from <i>Spartacus</i> (1960).....	74

### Chapter 2—The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak: Embodiment, Transcendence, and Widescreen Historical Spectatorship

Figure 7, advertisement for Cinerama.....	87
Figure 8, scene from <i>The Cyclorama of Jerusalem</i> .....	108
Figure 9, screenshot from <i>The Robe</i> (1953).....	108
Figure 10, screenshot from <i>The Robe</i> (1953).....	109
Figure 11, screenshot from <i>The Robe</i> (1953).....	113
Figure 12, screenshot from <i>Demetrius and the Gladiators</i> (1954).....	124

### Chapter 3—The (Un)Fortunate Fall into Color: Desire, Death, and the Technicolor Sex Drive

Figure 13, screenshot from <i>Samson and Delilah</i> (1949).....	160
Figure 14, screenshot from <i>Samson and Delilah</i> (1949).....	161

Figure 15, screenshot from <i>Samson and Delilah</i> (1949).....	164
Figure 16, screenshot from <i>Samson and Delilah</i> (1949).....	167
Figure 17, screenshot from <i>Samson and Delilah</i> (1949).....	168
Figure 18, Theda Bara in <i>Cleopatra</i> (1917).....	169
Figure 19, screenshot from <i>Samson and Delilah</i> (1949).....	170
Figure 20, screenshot from <i>David and Bathsheba</i> (1951).....	179
Figure 21, screenshot from <i>David and Bathsheba</i> (1951).....	182
Figure 22, screenshot from <i>Quo Vadis</i> (1951).....	185
Figure 23, screenshot from <i>Quo Vadis</i> (1951).....	187
Figure 24, screenshot from <i>Quo Vadis</i> (1951).....	188
Figure 25, screenshot from <i>Quo Vadis</i> (1951).....	189
Figure 26, screenshot from <i>Quo Vadis</i> (1951).....	192

#### Chapter 4—Paradise Lost: Melancholic Utopia and the Experience of History in *Cleopatra*

(1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964)

Figure 27, screenshot from <i>Cleopatra</i> (1963).....	218
Figure 28, screenshot from <i>Cleopatra</i> (1963).....	222
Figure 29, screenshot from <i>Cleopatra</i> (1963).....	225
Figure 30, screenshot from <i>Cleopatra</i> (1963).....	225
Figure 31, screenshot from <i>Cleopatra</i> (1963).....	232
Figure 32, screenshot from <i>Cleopatra</i> (1963).....	232
Figure 33, screenshot from <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	237
Figure 34, screenshot from <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	238

Figure 35, screenshot from <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	241
Figure 36, screenshot from <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	242
Figure 37, screenshot from <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	247
Figure 38, screenshot from <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	248
Figure 39, screenshot from <i>The Fall of the Roman Empire</i> (1964).....	249

## Introduction

On August 8, 2017, President Donald J. Trump warned that North Korea would face “fire and fury like the world has never seen” if that nation continued its nuclear posturing against the United States. Needless to say, Kim Jong Un responded in kind, and in the months that followed the war of words ratcheted upward, neither side willing to back down. Once again, as had been so often the case during the Cold War, two nuclear powers engaged in a game of brinkmanship, dismissive of the consequences for global stability, and the increasingly heated exchange generated significant commentary about the seeming imminence of nuclear war. The January 2018 decision by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists to move the infamous Doomsday Clock to two minutes ‘til midnight—the closest it had been to the theoretical doomsday since 1953, when both the United States and the Soviet Union tested hydrogen bombs—exacerbated those fears, and an accidental ballistic missile alert in Hawaii in the same month sent many into a panic until it was revealed to have been the result of human error. Throughout 2017 and into 2018, a veritable cottage industry of atomic commentary sprang up in the nation’s magazines, and in February the nuclear threat went mainstream when *Time* featured a mushroom cloud on its cover, proclaiming that Trump was “Making America Nuclear Again.”

Of course, atomic anxieties were nothing new for Americans, for Trump’s war of words emerged at the beginning of August, coinciding with the event that, seventy years earlier, had marked the dawn of the atomic age: the dropping of the bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the bombs had ended the most destructive conflict in history, they had also engendered the possibility that humanity could bring an end to itself, imperiling the very future they were supposed to have guaranteed. As Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most

influential theologians and intellectuals in the postwar period put it, “the threat of atomic warfare has prompted a mood of hysteria among many moderns, not only because it proved history to be less certainly marching toward peace than they had imagined; but also because the spectre of death, which they had banished from their imagination, suddenly appeared in a new and more terrible form” (78). As atomic technology proliferated and grew ever more powerful in the 1950s and 1960s, so too did the fear of total annihilation. Increasingly, it came to seem as if those living in historical time were enmeshed in one long march toward collective extinction.<sup>1</sup> In 1967, literary critic Frank Kermode would put it more bluntly: history and eschatology were essentially the same thing. History led inexorably to the end (25).

If the future remained uncertain, the immediate past was hardly any more reassuring. For all the promise that modernity had seemed to hold out, the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century had wedded that promise to spectacular destruction and chaos. The rampant wealth of the 1920s had led to the crushing deprivation of the Great Depression in the 1930s; the hopes for global cooperation among a fraternity of nations—expressed in the purpose and formation of the League of Nations—had emerged in the aftermath of one global conflict but failed to prevent the outbreak of another; the rational optimism of scientific advancement of the early decades of the new century produced vast improvements in medicine and quality of living, even as they also gave birth to the power of the atomic bomb and ever more effective ways of waging war and taking life; unparalleled population growth had emerged at the same time as the worst genocides in history. Humanity’s seemingly insatiable desire for chaos, destruction, and self-immolation marred modernity’s promise.<sup>2</sup>

After the end of the Second World War, Americans found themselves caught in an unsettled present, forced to confront what the historian Theofilo F. Ruiz has called “the terror of

history.” In his book of the same name, subtitled “On the Uncertainties of Life in Western Civilization,” Ruiz argues that the terror of history stems from the fact that moments of historical progress have frequently been built on barbarism, slaughter, and destruction. He notes that it also emerges from the pressing awareness of living in the forward movement of historical time, which always grinds down those caught in the wake of its progress. Laboring beneath this tyrannical temporality, individual subjects are constantly reminded of the powerful forces governing their lives and constantly circumscribing their agency. As a result, humanity has frequently turned to three strategies to attempt to cope with these pressures: the pursuit of religious experience, an immersion in the world of sex and the senses, and an escape into the world of the beautiful. However, the terror of history is not so easily escaped. In a period in which the linear movement of historical time increasingly intertwined with atomic apocalypse, any escape was doomed to be temporary (1-34).

Ruiz draws his title and his core concept from Mircea Eliade, a postwar philosopher of religion who would argue that a recognition of living in the midst of historical (as opposed to sacred) time had engendered a profound crisis for those living in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While Ruiz locates an awareness of the terror of history—and how individuals and communities have sought to escape from it—in various historical periods, the fact that he draws upon Eliade, a man working amid the profound uncertainties of the postwar world is revealing. Thus, Ruiz’s articulation of this theory of history is particularly apt as an interpretive gloss of the historical imagination of the atomic age. That is to say, those living in postwar America were confronted by both the traumas of the recent, war-torn past and the unspeakable yet ever-present possibility that the future, and the continuation of human history that it represented, might entail the annihilation of all of humanity itself. As a result, the idea of collective human history as



inevitable, progressive betterment came under increasing strain, and the historico-biblical epic, which re-emerged in the postwar period after a decade and a half of dormancy became, I argue, a prominent expression of this troubled sensibility.

Like many genres, the epic film is sometimes hard to pin down. However, a number of scholars have managed to sketch out the broad parameters of the genre, in terms of its industrial location as well as its depiction of historical events. Steve Neale argues that that the term “epic” is a term traceable to the 1950s and 1960s, where it was used by the industry to describe historical films (usually those with ancient world settings), as well as large scale films of other types that utilized new technologies and other production and exhibition elements to set themselves apart from other types of leisure pursuits (85). Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans likewise suggest that the genre takes as its subject “world historical events” that must in turn “be treated ‘epically,’ that is with resources of cinematic style approximating the effects of the epic in literature” (4), while James Russell points out that “a historical epic is always centered on a particularly memorable, cataclysmic or decisive historical event in history” (10), thus distinguishing the historical epic from its science fiction and fantasy counterparts.

Using this paradigm, this dissertation will focus in particular on those epic films set in antiquity. Further, I will utilize the term “historico-biblical epic” in order to account for the two types of films set in the ancient world that were popular in the immediate postwar decades, those that were biblical or quasi-biblical (e.g. *The Ten Commandments*, *Ben-Hur*, *Quo Vadis*) and those set in antiquity that did not have a religious orientation (e.g. *Cleopatra*, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*). Just as importantly, the term also conveys the liminal status that many of these films occupy, as they frequently utilize the sacred to answer the pressing historical questions of Cold War America. Filled with the wrath of God, earth-shattering events, and the rise and fall of

great nations, these films became an intensely visceral means of experiencing the perils and promises of this unsettled era, a visible manifestation of the atomic age historical imagination.

This dissertation argues that this genre, which flourished in Hollywood between 1949 and 1966 and included such films as *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *Cleopatra* (1963), provided American spectators with an opportunity both to experience and escape from the terror of history. The ubiquitous, smothering pressures of the postwar world—with its atomic bombs, its wars, its political fragmentation, its violence—and an ultimate end that was understood to be both imminent and immanent engendered in the epic a series of binaries: between agency and powerlessness, embodiment and transcendence, desire and death, and imperial zenith and nadir. Using the typology provided by Ruiz as a guide to work through the genre's contradictions, I demonstrate how the films themselves fail to resolve these tensions into a coherent ideological whole. The very strategies by which these films attempt to provide an escape from the uncertainties of life in the atomic age ultimately force a confrontation with them that is simultaneously pleasurable and frightening. Reading the films in this way allows for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which they reflect the deeply conflicted milieu that produced them, a nervous American culture trying, and never quite succeeding, to understand its place in time and in history.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I begin by laying out the history of antiquity in American politics and culture, demonstrating how the ancient world has, from the beginning of the United States, been used to make sense of the new country's place in history, full of both promise and peril. However, as I demonstrate, it was through the medium of film—particularly in the form of the epic—that antiquity gained its most prominent perch in American culture. I then shift into a discussion of the scholarly conversation that has grown up around antiquity in epic film, paying

attention to three different disciplines that have approached the subject in different ways: classical studies, religious studies, and film studies. However, as I demonstrate through the outline of my four chapters that follow, an analysis working at the interstice of these discrete disciplines allows for a nuanced understanding of how these films engage with the fraught terrain that lies between history, faith, and film.

In taking this approach, I show how the Hollywood epic should be taken seriously as a form of engagement with history, and I work from the understanding that history refers not only to what transpired in the past, but also to the uses to which the present puts that past to confront the complexity of the current moment and the uncertainty of the future. As Vivian Sobchack powerfully reminds us in her work on the epic, “In that both the work of academic scholarship and the epic construct interpretive narratives formulated around and foregrounding past human events as coherent and significant, both are temporally reflexive and both respond—if in different ways and through different experiences—to the same central and philosophical question: *how to comprehend ourselves in time*” (26, emphasis in original). The question of how to locate oneself in time becomes a particularly pertinent, and fraught, question in a period in which the end of time itself becomes simultaneously imminent and immanent. These films, often despite their obvious intentions and despite their triumphalist and seemingly straightforward ideological messages about American supremacy, expose the deep cultural angst of a culture that increasingly understood itself to be living in the perilous few minutes before the stroke of midnight.

## A Brief History of Antiquity in American Politics and Culture

The use of antiquity has particularly deep roots in American politics and culture, a flexible set of myths and ideals through which it has frequently articulated its position in history. Ancient Rome proved an especially useful exemplar for the Founders, who envisioned the new nation taking on the mantle of the Roman Republic (Richards 3). However, this self-proclaimed inheritor of ancient imperial greatness would need to maintain a specific sort of civic virtue if it was to avoid the fate of its predecessor. The specter of the Empire—with its corruption, its Caesars, and its inevitable fall—always haunted the more idealistic model represented by the Republic. Furthermore, American thinkers from John Adams onward fretted that the United States was but the latest stage of an inevitable cycle of the rise and fall of great powers; what had brought down the ancient empires might bring down their modern counterparts (Malamud 3-11).<sup>4</sup> However, as Margaret Malamud demonstrates, the Founders hoped that the new American republic “could match and even surpass the glories of Rome while avoiding, or at least delaying for an indefinite period of time, any subsequent decline and fall” (11). From the earliest days of the American experiment, then, the ancient world threatened to evoke the very anxieties it was supposed to ameliorate.

While ancient Rome (and, to some extent, ancient Greece) provided a model for the new nation’s government, antiquity also provided spiritual guidance in the form of a deeply-rooted belief in Christianity. From the Puritans declaring their colony a city on a hill to the image of North America as a new Holy Land, Protestant America was understood as a religious space that provided an alternative experience of time. The figuration of the American continent as a new Eden emerged, John Davis argues, “not from a desire to emulate or remain within the past, but from the applicability of the concept to a uniquely sanctioned future” (15). The colonists

collapsed space into time, so that the conquest of land—both literal and figurative—was justified by a biblically ordained sacro-historical framework: the biblical past provided meaning to the present and seemed to guarantee the promise of a future, and this framework would be used by Americans of various classes, races, and creeds, including Mormons and African Americans (Davis 13-26).<sup>5</sup> This desire to encounter the past in the present would continue to exert a strong hold on the American imagination.

As a signature brand of Protestantism became increasingly prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American cultural landscape, it intersected with the pre-existing notions of the corrupt, deadly Roman Empire. Now Rome became the persecutor of virtuous Christians, and while popular novels and plays of the time—such as Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* (1880) and Wilson Barrett’s play *The Sign of the Cross* (1895)—paid perhaps a little too much attention to the spectacle of the chariot race and the lurid aspects of Christian martyrdom and apocalyptic imagery, they nevertheless offered the reassurance that those persecuted by the powerful Roman state would eventually rise above and conquer from within. History, in other words, was on the side of the Christians, who increasingly came to stand in for virtuous Americans. Not only was America destined to be the place where God’s vision for humankind would reach its fullest expression; there was a divinely sanctioned and historical purpose for its existence (Malamud 122-148).

The ancient world saturated the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century cultural sphere. The Greek and Latin curriculum still dominated the education of those in both the upper and middle classes, while the Bible occupied a position in almost every person’s home. Shakespeare’s plays about antiquity, including *Julius Caesar*, continued to be very popular on the stage, and of course there were the bestselling novels *Ben-Hur*, *Quo Vadis?*, and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Solomon 3). Antiquity also appeared in paintings of the period, most notably the works of such artists as Thomas Cole,

whose four-part series *The Course of Empire* captured the ambiguity of the relationship between the ancient world and the modern (Allen 48-51). John Martin, the British master of the “apocalyptic sublime,” with his famous works—including *Belshazzar’s Feast* (1820), *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852), and his triptych *The Last Judgment* (1851-1854)—would encourage many American painters to produce similarly-themed works. Martin’s work would also inspire the vast spectacles of later epic films, as well as these films’ interest in providing an experience of the terror of the ancient world (Richards 9-10).<sup>6</sup>

Given the prominence of the ancient world in the various popular media of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it comes as little surprise that the new medium of film would take advantage of the built-in appeal that antiquity offered to audiences. However, there was also the cinema’s desire to be taken seriously as a form of art, and Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke argue that “antiquity helped legitimise cinema as an autonomous and competitive form of mass culture artistically, aesthetically and culturally. It provided filmmakers with sanctioned and canonical subject matters and the license to use them in a variety of ways that could blur the distinction between education and entertainment. On a very basic level, early cinema turned to classical antiquity as a source for ethical, political or sexual models to be emulated, but also antitypes to be confronted” (6-7).

Throughout the early days of film, pieces set in antiquity proliferated. Several versions of *Ben-Hur* were produced, including the 1907 Kalem short film. There were also filmed versions of more explicitly spiritual subjects. Perhaps most famously, the world-famous (and later infamous) *Passion Play of Oberammergau* was filmed and shown in 1898. Salome, Cleopatra, Cain and Abel, Nero, Moses, and of course Pompeii were also favorite subjects among American filmmakers throughout the early days of film (Solomon 3-5). However, it was in Italy that the

epic tradition most potently intersected with the cinema, with the release in 1908 of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, directed by Arturo Ambrosio (Solomon 3). Both the Italian versions of *Quo Vadis* (released in 1913) and *Cabiria* (1914), rendered visible the ways that the ancient Roman past could be used to address the concerns of the present and point the way toward the future. *Cabiria* in particular, with its emphasis on the corruption of the Carthaginians and the righteousness of the Roman conquest of an African nation, was clearly intended to bolster Italy's imperialist ambitions. In other words, Italy's claims to a future as an imperialist power was reinforced by an appeal to the ancient past (Wyke 165). Given that the Italian film industry was also angling to secure substantial fortunes for itself and that *Quo Vadis* and *Cabiria* were such enormous financial successes both in Italy and in the United States, the epic soon gained another strand in its already complicated genealogy: the impression that it was a profit powerhouse for fledgling film studios (Wyke 26).

The international success of these films persuaded American director D.W. Griffith to try his hand at a similarly grand experiment with film form. After a multi-reel foray into the Bible with *Judith of Bethulia* (1914), Griffith would put the epic film form to full use with his racist interpretation of the Civil War and its aftermath, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and, as an act of atonement, the even longer and more complex film *Intolerance* (1916). The interlaced narrative strands of the latter film had two stories that stemmed from the ancient world: the fall of Babylon to the invading force of the Persians, and the Crucifixion of Christ. While *Birth of a Nation* would go on to become one of the most financially successful films of the silent era, *Intolerance* did not, its extraordinary length undercutting its financial prospects and serving as a warning to filmmakers of the limits of the epic form as a financially viable genre.

Despite the failure of *Intolerance*, other filmmakers took note of the enormous potential in the power of conjoining epic narrative and sacro-historical concerns, and the latter half of the 1920s and the early 1930s saw a flowering of the genre. The earliest epic films frequently rendered the connection between antiquity and modernity explicit, frequently for moralistic purposes. The narratives of *Intolerance* and Cecil B. DeMille's first version of *The Ten Commandments*, for example, interlace stories of the ancient world with the modern to provide moral lessons, about the destructive power of humanity's cyclical desire to destroy beauty (in the case of *Intolerance*) and about the dangers of flouting divine law (both the narrative of the Exodus and the one set in the present day of *The Ten Commandments*).

Fred Niblo's enormous production of *Ben-Hur* in 1925 marked a point of no return for the epic, influencing the development of the contours of the genre that would continue to hold sway when it reemerged after World War II (Elley 17). The film smashed the box office and earned truly epic profits for MGM. Subsequent films in the cycle, such as, *The King of Kings* (1927), *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), and *Cleopatra* (1934) (all Cecil B. DeMille), showed that ancient world epics continued to appeal to modern spectators. The epic seemed to have touched a particularly powerful nerve, providing a set of pleasures and cinematic experiences that exceeded that of the relatively short earlier ancient world films it. Robert Burgoyne, one of the foremost scholars on the genre, argues that the epic, perhaps more than any other form of the emergent mass media, took the pleasures and perils of modernity—the phantasmagoria of sounds, sights, movements, and increased speed of life—and rendered it into sublime spectacle. From the beginning, then, the cinematic epic brought into conflict multiple, often conflicting experiences of time—ancient and modern, secular and religious, the beginning of the great civilizations and their end (“Introduction” 2). And, like the cultural forms that preceded it, it often intertwined the



peril and the pleasure of antiquity: sexuality and its punishment, the agency of the hero and his abasement, the giving of the law and its transgression.

Unfortunately, this epic pinnacle did not last beyond the middle of the 1930s, and the release of *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1935 would largely end this cycle. However, many of these films would be periodically re-released, often to address the changing concerns of American audiences. For example, DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* was re-released in 1944 and featured a scene of American bombers flying over Mussolini's Italy, drawing a clear connection between Nero, the mad and destructive emperor of Rome, and the current fascist dictator. These re-releases notwithstanding, it is hard to deny that the increasing pressures of both the Great Depression and World War II forced a change in American audience tastes. The ancient world and its vicious decadence seemed out of tune with the pressures of the time. Jon Solomon argues that the appearance of fake weapons and unwieldy chariots would have seemed misplaced to an American public accustomed to the brutal reality of tanks, airplanes, and the machinery of war, with all their destructive potential. When antiquity did appear in the 1940s, typically it was in a light-hearted fashion such as in *Fiddlers Three* (1944) or drawn from theatrical sources such as the adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945) (Solomon 11).

Thus, when Cecil B. DeMille proposed *Samson and Delilah* to the nervous bosses at Paramount in the late 1940s, he faced an uphill battle. However, the veteran showman, as always, had his finger on the pulse of American audiences' tastes, and the film became the top box office draw of 1949. The success of his biblical epic inspired a spate of other films set in the ancient world, and the following decade and a half would see films set in almost every region and time of Mediterranean antiquity: *The Old Testament (David and Bathsheba* (1951), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), *The Bible: In the Beginning* (1966)), Greece

(*Helen of Troy* (1956), *Alexander the Great* (1956), *The 300 Spartans* (1962)), The New Testament and early days of Christianity (*Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954)), Egypt (*The Egyptian* (1954), *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955)), and ancient Rome proper (*Spartacus* (1960), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964)). Many of these films amassed significant critical praise—*Ben-Hur* (1959) would go on to win more Academy Awards than any film before it—and several would also become the top box-office draws of the years of their release. *Samson and Delilah* topped the box office of 1949, *Quo Vadis* of 1951, *The Ten Commandments* of 1956, and *Ben-Hur* of 1959.<sup>7</sup> While this trend would not be as prominent in the 1960s, both *Cleopatra* and *The Bible: In the Beginning* would be the top earners of their respective years (1963 and 1966, respectively).<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the ancient world exerted a powerful hold on the postwar imagination.

### Critical Understandings of the Ancient World Epic

Classicists have explored the ways in which the ancient world has been used by filmmakers to make sense of the concerns of the present, so that the ancient world speaks in the idiom of the present. Since the publication of Jon Solomon's groundbreaking work *The Ancient World in the Cinema* in 1978 (cited above), numerous monographs and articles have been published exploring the various aspects of antiquity as they have appeared in American cinema and popular culture. Many of these are general overviews of the subject: *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (edited by Sandra R. Joshel and Margaret Malamud, 2005), *Big Screen Rome* (Monica Cyrino 2005); *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds* (Jeffrey Richards, 2008), *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* (edited by Alistair J.L. Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin, 2011), and *A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen* (edited

by Arthur J. Pomeroy, 2017), while others, such as *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (Gideon Nesbit, 2008) and *Ancient Rome at the Cinema: Story and Spectacle in Hollywood and Rome* (Elena Theodorakopoulou, 2010) are more focused studies. There are also the several volumes edited by Martin Winkler committed to individual ancient world epic films, including those on *Spartacus* (2006) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (2009). This body of work has done much to explicate the resonances between the ancient world and modern, and these scholars demonstrate how antiquity has remained remarkably durable and flexible as a means by which those living in the present can understand themselves and their relationship to the past.

Exemplary in this regard is Maria Wyke who, in her book *Projecting the Past: Cinema, Rome, History*, usefully demonstrates through four case studies how different figures from antiquity—Cleopatra, Nero, Spartacus, and the city of Pompeii—were easily adapted to address the concerns of various periods of American history. Wyke is thoroughly historicist in the sense that she draws on the various debates and discourses circulating around these figures, so that, for example, the Cleopatra of the 1930s reflects the instabilities of women's role in consumer culture, while that of the 1960s represents the sorts of empowered female leaders who were increasingly taking a more prominent role on the international stage. However, in keeping with the presentist ethos that has come to dominate many understandings of ancient history in film, she frequently asserts a direct correspondence between figures in the present and those in the past so that, for example, the corrupt Roman emperors of the past become the communists or fascists of the present, while the persecuted Christians become the Americans responsible for leading the world into freedom.<sup>9</sup> While that is certainly one level at which these films operate and were encountered, I will argue throughout this dissertation that it is also useful to pay attention to the ways in which the epic film expresses and provides an experience of the

historical imagination of the atomic age in ways not reducible to straightforward metaphors. Nevertheless, her meticulously-researched situating of these films within their historical contexts has served as a model of my own approach to the genre of the ancient world epic.

Those working in religious studies, on the other hand, have tended to focus on three broad areas: the (re)interpretation of biblical texts and issues; the religious experience offered by various iterations of the broad term the “religious film,” and explications of the Christ figure in film. Representative works addressing these concerns are *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Gerald Forshey, 1992), *Jesus at the Movies: The First One Hundred Years* (W. Barnes Tatum, 1994), *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Lloyd Baugh, 1997), *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood’s Making of the American Christ* (Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, 2006), *Jesus of Hollywood* (Adele Reinhartz, 2007), *The Religious Film* (Pamela Grace, 2009), and *The Bible and Cinema* (Adele Reinhartz, 2013). Because so many of these scholars see the ancient epic as part of the religious film tradition—a category which encompasses many kinds of films, from the epic to the musical to the melodrama—they largely bracket out the question of history as such. These works are also frequently haunted by the same presentist orientation that characterizes the classical reception tradition; they focus on what the biblical epic reveals about its moment of production in relatively straightforward correlations.

Working from within film studies, Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, in their foundational *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema*, argue that the biblical epic “communicates as paradigms of a highly secularized society’s dramatising of its religious foundations through mechanisms on which secular values have had a profound impact” (14). That is to say, the biblical epic is a means by which an increasingly secular culture can access the spiritual even if, as other critics have pointed out, the genre does not provide a feeling of

transcendence.<sup>10</sup> As Babington and Evans go on to say, these films “have a sub-textual richness that emerges from the expression of secular concerns in the context of religious ideology, and vice versa” (15-16). It is precisely because the epic so easily exploits the fragile dividing line between the sacred and the secular that it can address the pressing (and increasingly intertwined) spiritual, political, and cultural concerns of modernity.

This dissertation owes a great intellectual debt to the work undertaken by Babington and Evans, who were some of the first to elevate the epic as a Hollywood film genre out of the critical opprobrium in which it has remained mired. It is worth pointing out, however, that they frequently rely on Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis, with little attempt to historicize why it is that the films would draw on these paradigms in their rendering of the ancient world. Relatedly, since they trace the genre’s metamorphosis through several periods—the silent era, the classic Hollywood period, the 1980s—their analysis often minimizes the cultural specificity of the particular periods in which the epic has dominated. And, given their interest in the genre’s engagement with questions of religious faith rather than history, the book frequently brackets the latter term, only referring to it in passing, leaving the fraught interstice between faith and history largely under-explored.

While Babington and Evans largely bracket out the question of history, other film scholars, including Derek Elley, Robert Burgoyne, and Vivian Sobchack have explored the epic’s wrestling with the deeply fraught *relationship* between past and present. Perhaps the first monograph explicitly devoted to the epic film as a cinematic form, Derek Elley’s *Epic Film: Myth and History* established the parameters within which subsequent work would engage with the genre. Focusing on its literary lineage, Elley argues that the epic often explains the roots of a nation or people, and it thus emerges in moments of intense national feeling, when there is a

pronounced desire for a collective identity to which one can belong. For American culture this emerged particularly strongly during the 1950s, when the U.S. was still flush with victory in World War II and seemed poised on the brink of a century in which it would be the dominant power on the global stage. Antiquity seemed to provide the perfect justification (and warning) for the present.

Elley argues that temporal distance also contributes to the epic's emotional appeals. The span of time separating the spectator from the story allows for a greater flexibility in what can be shown, and Elley thus focuses on those epics set in the periods leading up to roughly the medieval. "The past has always excited man's imagination more than the tangible present," he writes, "since it gives him greater scope to dream" (12). The immediacy of the present—and the recent past—restricts the ability of the epic to explore the possibilities of the past, demanding a greater degree of fidelity to the historical record. As he goes on to say, "the accumulation of fact and a more recognisable social structure lead straight to our present century, and in the cinema [...] the post-early medieval period diluted the hero to a mere swashbuckler" (12). Central to the epic, then, are heroes who are larger than life, men and women who generate an aura of importance in excess of their presence as individuals. As I shall demonstrate, however, this view of the dreamscape offered by the epic is only part of the picture. Beneath the ostensible optimism associated with the ancient world—with its powerful God, its savior, and the birth of nations and peoples—are the nightmares that haunt the cultural unconscious, the punishment of that God, the abjection of the savior, and the collapse of imperial ambitions.

Working in the same tradition as Elley, Robert Burgoyne considers the epic as part of a broader category of the Hollywood historical film, which also includes the war, topical, meta-historical, and biographical films, and he explores how the epic contends with the past, rendering

it meaningful and often inspiring for the present. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze (who himself drew on Nietzsche), Burgoyne argues that the epic intertwines three different approaches to history: the antiquarian (the focus on fabrics, surfaces, and textures), the monumental (the great vistas, battles, and conflicts of the past), and the critical-ethical (which organizes the other two into a coherent whole). The interaction between these three models typically revolves around the body of the epic hero, who remakes the social milieu in which he is located, so that the film typically ends in a different space than where it began (*Hollywood Historical* 77-78). The past, therefore, has a moral function for the present. While I do not always agree with Burgoyne's sanguine reading of the epic's essential optimism and progressivism, his work has revealed the ways that the epic can be understood as an engagement with the processes of historical change.

Vivian Sobchack in her essay on the epic as a form of historical experience, similarly explores the linking of past, present, and future in the genre. Explicitly working against the tradition that sees the epic as an embarrassment and unworthy of critical analysis, Sobchack argues that, rather than adopting the transcendental, removed detachment of traditional historical writing, the epic instead offers a carnal, embodied experience of historical time. The epic, with its emphasis on the surge and splendor of the past and on the material expenditure involved in its production, appeals to a desire to experience a span of time greater than the individual life, predicated on the excessive, and deeply corporeal, appeal of the genre (29-30). Rather than understanding the past as distinctly different from the present, the epic frames the past and the present in terms of their similarity, leading to "the objectification and projection of *ourselves-now as we-then*" (26, emphasis in original).

I engage with Sobchack's work in more detail in chapter two, but for now I want to emphasize that it is precisely this question of *experience* that motivates this dissertation's

inquiry. Like Sobchack, I argue that the epic is more than just a *representation* of the past, that this genre calls to individual and collective spectators in deep, powerfully immediate, and frequently embodied ways. However, I wish to nuance her claims in two important ways. As I have already made clear, I focus specifically on those epics set in an antiquity which, I have demonstrated, has always held a conflicted appeal to Americans dwelling in the midst of modernity, holding out the allure of (often sacred) beginnings and the terror of (often divinely sanctioned) endings. Second, I have limited my analysis to those epics set in the immediate postwar period. If, as Sobchack also asserts, the epic is a means by which a given culture attempts to apprehend itself in time, examining it in the specific context of atomic age concerns about the endangered future and the blood-soaked past allows for a more nuanced understanding of how this particular film genre allowed its nervous American spectators to cope with the anxiety of living in the shadow of death.

Clearly, the historico-biblical epic is a promiscuous product of Hollywood that has deep roots in the American cultural imaginary and, as Adeline Johns-Putra observes, has tended to surge in popularity in the after periods of war and instability. In both moments of the genre's greatest flourishing in American cinema—the 1920s and the 1950s—the form entailed “a turn to a mythical past to shore up doubts about the stability and coherence of the present [...] epic film evinces a completely nostalgic embrace of an utterly coherent past. Biblical and Roman worlds offer, in epic film, a myth of completeness and wisdom, one a hermetically sealed realm where God's word is law and the other an ancient empire whose philosophies and policies are time-honored and therefore venerable” (191). Certainly, the postwar epic, like its predecessors, attempts to assuage the doubts of the present, but I argue that the profound uncertainty about the future, in conjunction with an encounter with an antiquity as full of terror as it is of the



miraculous, shatters the genre's surface coherence, and this clash of temporalities engenders the contradictory experience of the terror of history. In the following four chapters, I examine the various ways in which these films contend with the profound uncertainties of the present, and each chapter focuses on a key tension that emerges from the conflict between the different temporalities and traumas that characterized the atomic age.

I would like to offer one caveat before continuing. For all that it frequently draws on an international cast and was often shot overseas, the postwar epic remains largely an Americo-European genre, concerned with the pressures of the atomic present as they were felt by those living in the west. While the Middle East is certainly a presence in these films and was very much part of the global political climate, the midcentury epic primarily uses the region as a means of making sense of its own position in history and modernity. Melani McAlister argues that, “the biblical epic films were significant [...] not just for what they said about the Middle East but also for what they made the Middle East say about the world” (55). As I will discuss in the conclusion, however, the recent iteration of the epic has taken the issue of western engagement with the east as one of its central concerns.

### Outline of Chapters

Chapter one lays out the broad historical context of atomic anxieties, demonstrating how the advent and proliferation of this destructive technology generated a deep doubt in American culture—both secular and religious—about the nature, and the possibility, of human power in this new age. I focus on four key films of the postwar cycle: *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), and *King of Kings* (1961). In each of these films, the seemingly powerful epic hero finds himself subjected to forces so much larger than he that they

can rarely find direct on-screen representation—the God of the Old Testament appears as an eerily atomic pillar of fire, for example—and their endings films rarely bring to fruition the historical potential toward which they have seemingly been moving. The pervasive doubt about the future punctures the endings of these films, so that the fulfillment of history—the establishment of the state of Israel, the downfall of slavery in the Roman Empire—remain permanently deferred, and the efforts of the epic hero remain doomed to uncertainty.

If the recent past and the uncertain future found expression in the conflicted narratives of the epic, the genre also sought to use the Christian origin story to provide an escape from the bleak march into certain extinction. The reintroduction of widescreen technology with the release of Fox's *The Robe* in 1953 promised spectators the ability to encounter—through powerful, embodied immersion—the moment when historical time reached its fulfillment at Christ's death. However, the inevitable forward movement of secular, profane time makes it impossible to fully experience the escape from history that this pivotal event represents, forcing an encounter with the uncertainties of history. Through an examination of *The Robe*, as well as two other films that engage with the aftermath of the Crucifixion—*Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) and *Barabbas* (1961)—chapter two exposes the uneasy tension at the heart of the epic's supposed transcendence of historical time.

While the conflicted appeals of widescreen exposed the limits of temporal escape, the epic also offered postwar spectators an ancient world flush with the vital yet destructive power of erotic desire. In chapter three, I shift into a discussion of the ways in which the end of history promised by the atomic bomb came to be something both desired and feared, even as a constraining containment ideology promised that the future could be guaranteed through heterosexual reproduction and consumerism. Drawing on these conflicting impulses, epics such

as *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *David and Bathsheba* (1951), and *Quo Vadis* (1951), conjoin death and desire through the pulsing hues of Technicolor, their violent endings providing a source of destructive, orgasmic pleasure. Emerging at a key moment in which the domestic containment ideology had yet to fully crystallize, these early epics express a yearning for a loss of self—and all of its historical implications—and attempt to provide it.

Chapter four focuses on two of the last epics of the midcentury cycle, *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). I argue that they express a form of what I term “melancholic utopia,” a mourning for a better world that is rendered a possibility but never fulfilled. By situating these films amid increasing anxieties over the collapse of the old imperial powers and the increasingly tenuous ability of the United Nations to keep the world stable and free of conflict, I show how these films responded by maintaining a tension between moments of utopian spectacle and the inevitable (and inexorable) movement of narrative toward catastrophe. Produced in a period in which the genre itself seemed to be waning and in which the triumphalist complacency of the Eisenhower era was perceived to be increasingly endangered, these final epics conjoin these contradictory impulses.

In the conclusion, I move into a discussion of the recent cycle of epics, demonstrating how the interests of the genre have turned more explicitly to the waning of empire—and of a particular form of heroic masculinity—and an effort to resuscitate them. Films such as *Gladiator* (2000), *Alexander* (2004), *Troy* (2004), *300* (2006) and more recent films such as *Noah* (2014), *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), and *Ben-Hur* (2016), register an awareness that the era of American superpower dominance is on the wane. While the heroes in these films—Maximus, Alexander, Achilles, Leonidas, Noah, Moses, and the new Judah—seem to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors and to demonstrate the need for such male heroes for a new era,

the deaths of so many of these new heroes register a pressing awareness of the uncertain, and almost certainly lesser, future. What's more, they also demonstrate the extent to which the Middle East, as a region increasingly central to American imperialism, has also become a site where the uncertainties of history can be explored.

These chapters demonstrate that situating the epic in its specific historic contexts allows for history itself to be historicized. To put it another way, rather than assuming that living in the midst of historical time means the same thing in different moments of American culture, I argue for the necessity of considering the ways in which deeply-ingrained generic and cultural forms such as the epic respond to specific pressures in particular historical moments of their prominence. I would also argue that the type of historical experience offered by the epic is of a very different nature than that offered by other genres that also purport to do so, such as the costume drama, the swashbuckler, the western, or other historical films set in more recent times. There is, as Sobchack notes, a sense of temporal plenitude inherent in the epic's historical vision, and in a period in which both the present and the future seem so uncertain and endangered, the epic provides an experience of both the infinite potential and the permanent foreclosure of such potential.

## Chapter 1—The Metal in the Maker’s Hand: Atomic Anxiety, Impotent Agency, and the Futility of Epic Heroism

In his review of Nicholas Ray’s *King of Kings* (1961), the critic Ivan Spear noted that part of the film’s appeal lay with its “connotated topicalness.” “A world trembling at the prospect of nuclear self-destruction,” he wrote, “should welcome an opportunity to again review the teachings of Him who was hailed as the Messiah of Peace” (15). The evocation of the threat of nuclear armageddon in the context of a biblical epic about the life of Christ highlights both the ways in which the religious, historical, and atomic imaginations intertwined in the postwar period, and the attempts of the genre of the historico-biblical epic to work through the profound existential and eschatological anxieties produced by the possible end of human history. For an American culture that, as historian Margot A. Henriksen suggests, experienced a sense that life was ephemeral, that nothing was permanent, and a more general “difficulty in imagining a human future,” the historico-biblical epic provided an opportunity to both encounter and escape the terrifying possibilities of history and its anticipated atomic end (110).

The proliferation of atomic technologies, and the concomitant fear of all-out, mutually destructive war, engendered a profound eschatological fear in American culture, a fear reflected in the genre’s narrative concern with heroic agency and subordination and unsatisfying endings. This chapter draws on a variety of historical documents, including contemporary newspapers and magazines, the works of public intellectuals, and thinkers in the Christian press, all of whom struggled to make sense of the possible end of human history and whether it could (or should) be prevented through human intervention. Through analysis of four films, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), and *King of Kings* (1961), as well as contemporary

reviews and promotional materials for these films, I show how the genre takes the terror posed by this ultimate ending and sublimates it into an ongoing narrative tension, in which the epic hero remains subservient to powers that exist beyond his control, his agency displaced onto forces—God, the abstraction of history, an unrealized future—that resist visual representation. Further, I argue that the intertwined imminence/immanence of extinction works against the ability of the genre to visually represent the redeemed future that its narratives seem to work toward, the fruition of the epic hero's quest infinitely deferred and undercut by the displacement of his agency onto those larger forces.

In what follows, I begin by describing the atomic anxieties that emerged immediately after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I demonstrate how the sheer scale of the destruction provoked both fear and elation in the United States, among both secular and Christian thinkers. While the former increasingly adopted a bleak worldview regarding the possibility of absolute destruction, the latter saw in the bomb the fulfillment of God's promise to bring about the end of the world. Both, however, acknowledged that humanity had become simultaneously omnipotent and powerless in the face of this new technology. I then show how these concerns were also reflected in the philosophy and literary criticism of the era, which also struggled with whether it was possible, in the face of this awesome power, to possess historical agency. I then show how each of the films register this disturbance in different ways, demonstrating that while the genre clearly *wants* to empower its heroes, the impossibility of becoming a meaningful actant in the postwar world generates the very sense of impotence and subordination that it seeks to ameliorate.

As a genre that draws upon both faith and history in its envisioning of the past, the historico-biblical epic is caught at the intersection of multiple competing notions of time.

Because the genre situates its narratives in an antiquity that can be described as what philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade identifies as mythic time and what film scholar Pamela Grace has called “miracle time,” God (or, by extension, Jesus) enters into history, directing the course of affairs.<sup>1</sup> Further, this ancient world is a temporal space in which the epic hero still seems to possess the ability to effect change in the world around him. However, as powerful as heroes such as Moses, Judah, and Spartacus seem, they remain subject to forces that direct their actions in ways they are powerless to resist. Furthermore, the change that is promised—whether that be the founding of the “free” nation of Israel, the escape from history promised by Christ, or the overthrow of Roman slavery—remains promised rather than fulfilled. The pervasive doubt about the viability of a human future and about human action more generally in the present atomic age undercuts the ability of the genre to represent the fulfillment of its narrative promise, which in turn emphasizes the tension between agency/impotence of the epic hero.

#### Temporal Instabilities and Uncertain Futures in the Atomic Age

The processes of fusion and fission, of binding and splitting, were not just the central processes used to generate atomic energy; they were also apt metaphors for the dominant ethos of containment culture and its inherently unstable binary logic. The dualisms that characterized so much of postwar American culture—between United States and Soviet Union, us and them, self and other, freedom and tyranny—existed in perpetual tension and in constant threat of collapse. As Alan Nadel contends in his book *Containment Culture*: “if the great metanarratives allow us to constitute a whole in the name of some territorial site—heavenly, national, ideological—they do so always in jeopardy of destruction by the binding energy upon which they rely for their integrity” (48). The concept of human agency, so seemingly assured by the

power of the atomic bomb, would gradually become just as unstable as the atom, perpetually fused with impotence.

The unleashing of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945 marked a turning point in the 20th Century; in the words of historian Paul Boyer, “Hiroshima bisected history” (*By the Bomb's* 133). It marked a definite and terrifying shift in the ability of man to destroy himself and shattered the very notion of history as progressive human betterment. While some continued to believe that atomic technology would enable the birth of a new world of peace, plenty, and prosperity, others saw the negation of human agency in the face of such awesome power. On the one hand, the technology held out the promise of international dominance for the United States and the culmination of America's destiny as the world's preeminent superpower. On the other, it represented the increasing possibility of a world capable of destroying itself, as the Soviet Union also began to make advances in the harnessing of nuclear energy and weaponry. The atom bomb was a sword that could cut both ways.

Immediately after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, American writers and intellectuals struggled to make sense of the existential fears (re)awakened by this new force. Norman Cousins' editorial, “Modern Man is Obsolete,” written soon after the bombings, peeled away the optimism surrounding the end of the war and exposed the deeper undercurrents of terror. He argued that seething beneath the triumph was “a primitive fear, the fear of the unknown, the fear of forces man can neither channel nor comprehend. The fear is not new; in its classical form it is the fear of irrational death. But overnight it has become intensified, magnified. It has burst out of the subconscious and into the conscious, filling the mind with primordial apprehensions” (5). Cousins' rhetorical emphasis on the “primitive” and the “primordial” reveal the extent to which the bomb marked an important leap forward, even as it



exacerbated the fears that had long haunted humanity. The title of his editorial, with the juxtaposition of “modern” with “obsolete,” also encodes several of the key tensions simmering beneath atomic discourse, particularly in regards to postwar America’s relationship to the power that it had now, seemingly, harnessed for its own military and industrial benefit. Modernity, with its perpetual trust in the innate good of scientific progress, had inadvertently rendered humanity’s collective future deeply uncertain, and Cousins’ emphasis on the irrationality of the terror provoked by such an endangerment highlights the inability of modern consciousness to fully control its threat.

David E. Lilienthal, the first chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, acknowledged this bifurcated sense of the possibilities and perils engendered by the atomic bomb. “It was so gigantic,” he noted, “so terrible, so beyond the power of imagination to embrace, that it seemed to be the ultimate fact. It would either destroy us all or it would bring about the millennium. It was the final secret of Nature, greater by far than man himself, and it was, it seemed, invulnerable to the ordinary processes of growth, decay, change” (18). In addition to drawing attention to the extent to which the bomb dwarfed the human (a recurring motif in much nuclear discourse), Lilienthal also evokes the terrifying duality at the heart of the bomb. It was the endpoint of scientific inquiry, the *telos* that science had been working toward and yet, paradoxically, so ineffable that it became something beyond the scope of human understanding.

These anxieties gained a more pressing edge when the advances in nuclear technology intersected with international affairs. Dr. Harold C. Urey, one of the key men involved in the Manhattan Project noted in 1946 that, in peering into the depths of the atom, “We were dealing with unknowns in the structure of matter. Now, in thinking about world control, mankind is dealing with new and unknown factors in the structure of international civilization” (18). For

Urey and his fellow atomic scientists, it was not just the object itself that had potency, but also the ways in which it would influence the relationships among the world's nations, particularly that between the United States and its rival the Soviet Union. When the Soviets began their own atomic tests in 1949, they called into question the idea that the bomb was somehow destined to remain in American hands alone. Further, the fact that a country whose political and values system were understood to be so diametrically opposed to that of the United States could gain this weapon for themselves raised the unpleasant possibility that those political tensions could erupt into a devastating nuclear war that would end in the destruction of both parties.

The bomb also split the idea that history and science would continue to march forward into a bright and promising new future. While this sense of optimism was certainly the prevailing mood in Washington, it existed in tension with the a more general pensive cultural mood. Even amidst the celebrations of victory after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, commentator Edward R. Murrow soberly declared "seldom, if ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured" (qtd. in Boyer, *By the Bomb's 7*). While this uncertainty about the possibility of a human future reached a fever pitch immediately after the conclusion of the war, it would continue to exist as a powerful undercurrent throughout the decades that followed. The development of the hydrogen bomb in 1953, with its ability to inflict damage substantially greater than that seen at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, heightened the sense that humanity was playing with forces that could bring about its own ultimate destruction.

It was fitting that the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists inaugurated its famous Doomsday Clock in 1947, featuring a clock face on the cover its newly-inaugurated magazine. If the clock had once represented the mastery of time, it now seemed that humanity had become subject to

the relentless forward movement of this mechanical understanding of temporality.<sup>2</sup> While it was of course possible to move the hands of the clock further from or closer to midnight depending on the atomic circumstances in the world at a given moment, it was hard to escape the feeling that humanity had now entered into a finite space of time before they would align on that dreadful twelve, and the annihilation of the world would arrive. This feeling would grow stronger when the Clock was moved from seven minutes to three in 1949 with the news that the Soviets had tested their own atomic bomb.<sup>3</sup>

A sense of dread quickly infected members of the American intelligentsia, and the Harvard historian Perry Miller pointedly asked, “what will America do—what *can* America do—with an implacable prophecy that there is a point in time beyond which the concept of a future becomes meaningless?” (217) Embedded within his rhetoric is a sense of fatalism, that nothing can ultimately be actively done in the face of a certain and absolute destruction. As a result of this despair, he went on to argue, “Humanity lusts after the conflagration, even after nature seems unlikely to provide it. The human finger actually itches for the trigger (239). Perry's rhetoric reveals how the agent of destruction has shifted from the natural world, or even God, to humanity itself. The ubiquity of the possibility of a human-initiated end has become so intense, and the sense of inevitability has generated so profound a sense of pressure, that the only solution seems to be to bring about the end of our own accord. In this understanding, history, the progressive march of linear time toward guaranteed destruction, engenders desire for oblivion.

It is also no accident that the philosophical movement of existentialism reached a peak in the years following 1945. The works of such European philosophers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir contended with the question of human agency in the atomic age, particularly as this bore on ethics and moral responsibility.<sup>4</sup> In America, the philosopher William

Barrett's 1958 book *Irrational Man* pointed out the essential contradiction between humankind's tremendous new power and the "starkly finite" "shape of man" revealed in modern art." Such art, in its ability to expose the contrast between "power and impoverishment," shows that there may yet be a redemption of the world from the "brute march of power," precisely by "exalting the humble and dirty little corners of our existence." "The bomb" he argues, "reveals the dreadful and total contingency of human existence. Existentialism is the philosophy of the atomic age" (64-65). Only when collective humanity has "drained to the bitter lees the bitter cup of his [sic] own powerlessness," thus embracing its utter finitude, "will he [sic] be able to "take his [sic] next great step forward" (272). Of course, there was always the possibility that such a remaking of the world might only happen with the ultimate conflagration, but existentialist thinkers like Barrett argued that it was precisely the self-finitization imposed by such uncertainty that rendered an authentic, ethical life possible in the modern age.

Just as historians and philosophers grappled with the question of whether individual ethics had meaning in the shadow of the atomic bomb, other elements of American culture struggled with the question of whether the individual had any power or agency in this new world. The answer was, unsurprisingly, complicated. Joseph H. Willits of the Rockefeller Foundation observed that, at nearly all of the conferences he had attended on atomic energy, the individual was hardly mentioned at all: "the individual, seemingly, had become too small change to matter" (*Symposium* 51). Other voices echoed these sentiments, with E.L. Woodward arguing that "no matter what shape it may assume [the atomic age] will be an uncomfortable place for the individual" (SM3). However, others acknowledged that while the individual did not have the ability to stop the advent of an atomic apocalypse, that same individual might, paradoxically, have the ability to bring about that very destruction. As the Alsop brothers commented in the

*Saturday Evening Post*, “no true democracy can confide in a single individual, the rocket controller, such responsibilities as would be his” (49).

Embedded within the Alsops’ concern with “true democracy” was another key tension of the Cold War era, that between the free state (a role the US was keen to appropriate for itself) and the totalitarian one (a role the USSR often occupied). At first, atomic technology seemed to provide the United States the ability to both intimidate its communist enemy and establish and maintain international peace and stability. However, once that technology came into the hands of the Soviets—they tested their own bomb in 1949 and thermonuclear devices in 1953—it drew attention to a potential weakness of the United States. In order to counter that threat, the U.S. had in many ways to become the very thing it opposed, adopting the trappings of a national security state. “In these years,” the historian Alice George writes, “Americans abdicated responsibility for thinking about nuclear war to their leaders,” and the power of those leaders—to call up the draft, to drop atomic bombs—“encroached on individual autonomy” (9-11).

As scholar Michael Rogin has argued, the increasing power of this U.S. security state placed particular pressure on the free, rugged male ideal that had so long existed within the American psyche. The increasing bureaucratization of postwar society threatened to destabilize the free state/slave state binary, as one came to appear very much like the other. Indeed, it was precisely the methods the free state used to defend itself against the subversive slave state that brought about this increasing destabilization. And, as Rogin remarks, “the boundary separating the free man’s state from its subversive twin was always in danger of collapsing in an implosion that would annihilate the free man” (240). The epic registers this disruption of the rugged male ideal by subjecting the epic hero (who is, of course, almost exclusively male and often extremely rugged) to forces over which he has little to no control. Furthermore, the sense of an impending

doom, coupled with the immense power of the atomic bomb, always pulls against and disturbs the seeming fulfillment of the epic quest.

### Creators and Destroyers: The Atomic Bomb and Religious Belief

The bomb eventually came to represent both the apex of humanity's collective omnipotence and yet, paradoxically, created the very sense of fragility that it seemed to displace. Gunther Anders, the Austrian philosopher and noted critic of nuclear technology, forcefully argued that "if there is anything that man regards as infinite, it is no longer God [...] it is his own power [...] this power to destroy, to reduce to nothingness, lies in our own hands." Yet, Anders also suggests, this new power terrifies us, producing a desire to return to the previous golden ages when humans were merely mortal rather than gods (288-289). In other words, the bomb, in religious scholar Ira Chernus' formulation, engenders a sense of creature-feeling, of smallness in the presence of vast, ineffable omnipotence, which itself generates our desire to control and channel this awesome power (53). The bomb ultimately becomes the solution to the problem that it has posed, and to some extent it becomes synonymous, as both Anders and Chernus seem to suggest, with God.

As early as 1945, there had been expressions of mingled awe and angst at the divine power that humanity had apparently assumed with the perfection of the bomb. Oppenheimer was alleged to have associated its power with the Hindu god Krishna, the All-Devourer, while other reports drew comparisons between the atomic blasts and biblical events such as the creation of the world and the Second Coming of Christ (Wojcik 101). The noted *New York Times* journalist William Laurence, upon seeing the bomb test at Alamogordo, wrote that "One felt as though one were present at the moment of creation when God said: 'Let there be light'" (11). He noted,

however, that others saw, not the Creation, but ““the nearest thing to Doomsday that one could possibly imagine”” (11). The unleashing of such cosmic destruction had clearly blurred the boundaries separating the beginning of the world from its end, provoking (paradoxically) an escape from the limits imposed by human understandings of temporality. Time itself had been destabilized, rendered porous and uncertain.

Truman, the President responsible for the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and a stalwart exponent of the technology, nevertheless expressed private ambivalence about the destructive possibility that humankind had unleashed. Comparing humankind to termites burrowing in the earth and inviting a reckoning for their intrusion into the unknown, he remarked that the bomb they had discovered was the most terrible in the world and that they might bring about the fiery destruction that God had prophesied at the end of the biblical flood (Boyer, *Fallout* 32). The words of Thomas F. Farrell, the Chief of Field Operations of the Manhattan Project, similarly describe “the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty” (qtd. In Groves 303). Both Truman and Farrell make clear the extent to which the bomb represented not only the pinnacle of human power—can one go higher than God?—but also the flip side of that dynamic. If humanity had harnessed powers previously restricted to the divine, then it had also generated a force over which it could just as easily lose control and that could lead to humankind destroying itself. Humanity became both divine and yet also perilously mortal.

Seen in this light, it is especially significant that the increasing growth of nuclear technology intersected with both a dramatic increase among those who declared themselves Christians and with a burgeoning religious movement that came to be known as the Fourth Great

Awakening. In the immediate postwar period church attendance reached significant heights. By 1950, church membership had risen to 55 percent of the population, by 1956 it had risen to 62 percent, and to 69 percent by the end of the 1950s (Whitfield 83). For a nervous culture faced with the possibility of atomic oblivion, religion provided at least one antidote to the pressures of the world, even as the bomb and the divine became increasingly intertwined in the Christian imagination.

Those in the Christian press drew upon various American traditions of apocalyptic thought to make sense of the end that seemed to be drawing ever closer. In much midcentury Christian apocalyptic thought, the seemingly arbitrary and unpredictable nature of God's decision to bring about the end of the world (no one knows the day nor the hour) dovetails with the unpredictable nature of the process utilized to create atomic energy. This awareness would also generate a profound sense of too lateness and powerlessness, a sense of temporal inevitability. Donald Grey Barnhouse, the Philadelphia radio preacher, proclaimed that "*it is already too late. The threads of inevitability have been caught in the mesh of the hidden gears of history and the divine plan moves toward the inevitable fulfillment*" (505 emphasis mine). Here, the "gears of history" (this evocative mechanical imagery eerily echoing the relentless linear logic of the Doomsday Clock) remain shrouded behind a veil of invisibility. Knowledge is therefore unattainable, and there is little or nothing that individual humans or governments can do to prevent the impending doom. Barnhouse suggests that collective humanity has found itself pulled, perhaps despite its will, into the ashes of the future.

Drawing on the New Testament, the eminent theologian Edward L. Long, Jr. suggested that the entire idea of secular history was no longer adequate for accounting for the problems of the nuclear age. What was needed instead was an understanding that "all achievement can be



quickly lost, and that life does not inevitably grow better” (109), a statement that taps into the pervasive skepticism about the Enlightenment historical narrative of progress and gradual human betterment. Yet he also believed that: “no destruction of the world can destroy the free will of the faithful by which they believe in God and partake of His eternity. *God’s will is supreme*, and those who serve him need not be caught in any final emptiness” (106 emphasis mine). As Cecil B. DeMille would do several years later, Long embeds within his rhetoric the tension between human autonomy (the emphasis on free will) and that of God (whose will, remember, is supreme) that neither he, nor the culture of which he was a part, could fully resolve. While the individual could, presumably, find a measure of salvific escape from the destruction of the forthcoming apocalypse through faith, doing so still required an absolute submission to a power greater than the self. Agency remains perpetually displaced onto a power greater than any individual human being.

Long also suggested that secular history could and should no longer be seen as the salvation of humankind’s collective sanity. “Because Christianity does not take history absolutely, in a time when history is threatened [...] only a belief in some constructive and positive significance beyond the confines of this world is safe from futility” (109-110). The theologian Bruce Shelley likewise suggested that in Judeo-Christian belief history does not matter in and of itself; instead, it is granted meaning by the final transcendent purpose of God, who can intervene into human affairs at any temporal point. Historian Angela M. Lahr refers to this belief as invested in the idea of “hopeless human history,” one that can only be redeemed by the power of God (19). Though this faith in the power of God seemed to provide a means of controlling and escaping from the terror of history’s end, the ability of each individual to effect change, or to possess agency, remained an afterthought, perpetually displaced onto the divine.

When it came to welding together the biblical and the atomic imaginary, no one could do it quite as well as the evangelist Billy Graham. Time and again, he utilized language associated with nuclear armageddon to call the people of America to Christ. He repeatedly referred to a “doomed generation” and of the hydrogen bombs that could destroy entire cities, suggesting that it was only through the faith allowed by conversion that the battle between good and evil, between American democracy and Communist tyranny, could be won. At the same time, the nuclear threat continued to give his message a pressing urgency, as it seemed that humankind’s proclivity to self-destruction had neatly coincided with God’s impending and imminent wrath to bring about the end of the world and the Second Coming.

Yet Graham also found himself trapped in a double bind, one that was a product of both his own rhetoric and the broader culture of which he was a part. As historian Stephen J. Whitfield puts it: “if the Cold War could be understood only in terms of supernatural powers, the scope for American action, ingenuity, and will was drastically reduced—perhaps almost entirely. And if the policies of the Kremlin were literally diabolical, then the hope for permanent, successful opposition virtually evaporated” (82). In Graham’s rhetoric, human agency becomes ineffective at best and unattainable at worst, and Whitfield usefully demonstrates the extent to which an enormously influential evangelist and public figure like Graham exposed the contradictions of the period even in the act of attempting to sublimate them. It was Graham’s good fortune that he was charismatic enough to gloss over the contradictions that he evoked in his apocalyptic rhetoric since, as Whitfield claims, “the resolution of such contradictions could not be achieved—only evaded (82). Glossing over does not render those instabilities null; it merely ensures that they will arise in other, sublimated forms.

Expressions like those of Long, Shelley, and Graham expose a growing desire in some quarters for the bomb to bring about both God's divine judgment, a yearning to escape from the bounds of human historical time. While these Christian thinkers attempted to fit the impending destruction of the world into existing patterns of prophetic belief, the religious philosopher Mircea Eliade, whose book *The Myth of the Eternal Return* was published in French in 1949 and in English in 1954, theorized the relationship between modern humanity and modern time. Utilizing the phrase "the terror of history," he explored the anxieties provoked by a collective awareness of living in historical as opposed to the mythic time allowed by earlier periods of religious belief. That earlier understanding of time encouraged a sense of participation in the workings of the cosmos, allowing for an avoidance of the irrevocable, inevitable linearity of history. Rather than being subject to the abstraction of secular history, mythic man becomes a part of sacred time itself.

Eliade argues that, as modern humanity becomes ever more divorced from the possibility of accessing that mythic period, it becomes increasingly aware of the inexorable nature of historical time. Modernity, according to Eliade, emphasizes the event that has meaning in and of itself, utterly divorced from the mythic import that previously characterized it. Unfortunately for the modern individual, this has meant that contemporary humanity finds it increasingly difficult to understand the terrors associated with both the now-irreversible flow of time and the catastrophic events that have accompanied it. "How can man [sic] tolerate the horrors of history—," he asks, —from collective deportations to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or even worse, only the result of 'liberties' that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of human history?" (151). As he becomes increasingly aware of the

terrifying nature of living in this new timescape, Eliade argues, it becomes increasingly unlikely that modern man can understand himself as either a “free being nor a creator of history” (157). One senses in Eliade’s formulation an echo of Rogin’s comments about the crisis faced by the free man in the modern security state, and his unacknowledged sexism highlights the extent to which a specifically male-oriented historical agency was understood to have been deflated in a postwar, atomically threatened, world.

In the world in which Eliade was writing, the only solution he saw to the terror of history and of humanity’s tendency toward self-destruction was a turn back to a belief in the power of the divine to redeem time, and no faith could do so (at least for Western societies), better than Christianity. He closes *Myth of the Eternal Return* by arguing that, despite humanity’s move away from the myths of repetition and renewal, the need for God has become ever more necessary in order to stave off the terror of historical time. Christianity, he suggests, is the “religion of ‘fallen man,’ a means of coping with what he calls “the final abandonment of the paradise of archetypes and repetition.” “It is only by presupposing the existence of God that he [modern humanity] conquers freedom [...] and, on the other hand, the certainty that historical tragedies have a transhistorical meaning, even if that meaning is not always visible in its present condition.” Anything else, he argues, can only lead to the terror and despair that come about with an awareness of the forward moving nature of historical time. In an age in which the increasing pace of scientific advancement and nuclear proliferation threatened the existence of collective humanity, Eliade’s words would have possessed a chilling relevance, particularly as Eliade’s emphasis on placing power back into the hands of a powerful divine figure echoes the sentiments of so many Christian thinkers of the atomic age.

Jonathan Z. Smith notes in his introduction to the 2005 edition of *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade's book is not, itself, timeless (xx). One can sense in his references to atomic bombings and deportations a clear evocation of the great events that convulsed the world during World War II and the Cold War that followed. The book was quite popular in the United States when it was published, and Eliade soon solidified his American academic reputation when he became a member of the faculty at the University of Chicago. While Eliade's theories on the history of religion have been critiqued by those in the field of religious studies, his primary relevance for my own thinking lies in his articulation of the link between history, time, and religious faith. Eliade's philosophy registers and articulates the prevailing doubt over whether an individual living in a world overshadowed by destruction and still reeling from the events of the recent past could find in the realm of secular history the solace that was needed.

#### Atomic Endings and the Paradoxes of Fiction

While Eliade was interested in the question of humanity's location in historical time, the influential critic Frank Kermode, in a series of lectures entitled *The Sense of Ending* explored similar questions regarding human agency as they found expression in fiction. First delivered as a series of lectures in 1965, they were later released in book form to substantial enthusiasm among American intellectuals. Somewhat surprisingly, given his subject and his own location in time, Kermode disavows the uniqueness of the nuclear threat, remarking that "it would be childish to argue, in a discussion of how people behave under eschatological threat, that nuclear bombs are more real and make one experience more authentic crisis-feelings than armies in the sky" (95).<sup>5</sup> However, the fact that he mentions such a threat at all gestures toward a recognition

that eschatological anxieties have clearly reached a fever pitch in the era in which he is writing and have influenced the ways in which he frames his argument.

It is thus significant that Kermode's lectures (and later book) were written after slightly more than two decades of pervasive nuclear threat, including the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which was the closest the globe came to the sort of world-ending apocalypse that had hovered on the temporal horizon. As such, his work stands not just as a theoretical cornerstone of studies of endings in fiction, but also as "one of the most enduring readings of the modernist apocalypse produced in a Cold War setting" (Végső 119). Further, his claims about endings are germane for the current investigation for, as he puts it, it is precisely the imposition of a definite ending which enables fiction to allow those living in the midst of historical time to make sense of human temporality. In an era in which such an ending (contrary to his claims) seemed more possible—indeed even likely—than at earlier periods, the ability of fiction to coherently solve the problems posed by that ending would come under increasing strain.

Kermode argues that, when reading a fiction, "we concern ourselves with the conflict between the deterministic pattern any plot suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to choose and so to alter the structure, the relations of beginning, middle, and end" (30). In other words, there exists in the heart of any narrative an essential tension between agency and predetermination. Those embedded in a narrative behave—and encourage the reader to believe—as if their actions are self-determined, even as there is a tacit acknowledgment, imposed by an ending, that such acts are always/already prescribed by the *telos* of the narrative in question. The purpose of such endings, Kermode ultimately argues, is to provide a sense of completion and significance to what has transpired, and he claims that those "in the midst [i.e. those in the present] make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision

of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle” (17). The satisfaction that the ending is *supposed* to provide adds structure to what has come before.

Kermode goes on to claim that, in modernity, the end is no longer imminent but immanent, and as a result an awareness of the ending presses upon every action that can be taken in a given circumstance. The finitude imposed by a definitive ending forecloses upon the chaotic multiplicity of possible actions and renders each action pregnant with future significance. While I agree with Kermode that an awareness of a possible ending has become ubiquitous in postwar culture, I would suggest that, in the nuclear age, the end is simultaneously imminent *and* immanent. It is precisely the confluence of these two temporal understandings that exerts such a pressure on the postwar imagination, challenging the structures of fiction that he outlines with such nuance. Since the bomb is always both present and absent, and since there can be no survival after the destruction it promises, the end forecloses on the ability of the beginning and middle of a given fiction to entirely make sense of it or to render it meaningful.

Kermode’s theory of fiction ultimately proposes that “the end” is “no longer a ‘transcendental’ event designating the end of history but the mode of existence of history itself” (Végső 119). To live in history—a moment in time always overshadowed by the fear of nuclear extinction—is to live with an awareness of an ending that cannot be altered by the actions taken by any individual. Indeed, that presumed ending subsumes all action into itself. The epics discussed in this chapter, as works of fiction produced in an age in which history and eschatology have intertwined and in which the end is both imminent and immanent, contain their heroes within a narrative in which their agency to affect the world around them remains perpetually circumscribed by forces they cannot name (and which frequently evade visual representation). Each of the films under consideration does this in a slightly different fashion.

While an Old Testament film such as *The Ten Commandments* visually encodes God in the form of an eerily atomic-looking deity that intercedes in the workings of history and renders Moses into nothing more than a vessel for the divine will, a New Testament epic such as *Ben-Hur* or *King of Kings* keeps God the Father at an even further remove from the events of the narrative. However, these Christological narratives also suggest that human agency should be/can only be placed into the hands of the invisible (yet possibly present) figure of God. A secular film such as *Spartacus*, on the other hand, not only subjects its titular hero to the greatest physical tortures of any of the films I consider here, but also expresses a profound skepticism about the ultimate value of that suffering.

#### Atomic Divinity: Divine Power and Mortal Subjection in *The Ten Commandments*

I begin my case studies with *The Ten Commandments*. Released a mere three years after the testing of hydrogen bombs rendered collective humanity more powerful—and more vulnerable—than ever, the story of Moses, one of the most violent and destructive of the Old Testament, renders the anxieties over agency in the atomic age particularly visible. In its exploration of the birth of human freedom, this film brings into conflict two opposing visions of time. On the one hand, the film's setting in a specific historical moment (during the reign of Rameses II) ensures that the audience understands the temporal specificity of the forthcoming narrative. This exists in tension, however, with the fact that this is also a temporal space in which God, all-powerful, capricious, and destructive, can still erupt into the temporal flow of historically grounded events and reshape them in his own image. Although the appearance of God seems to take the pressure off the question of human agency, the overwhelming power of this figure—who is consistently figured in atomically visual terms, first as a burning bush and



then as a pillar of fire—ultimately renders visible the impotence of the human in the face of a power that ultimately remains vast, ineffable, and faceless.

Released in 1956 to substantial fanfare and box office success, though a somewhat lukewarm critical reception, the film purports to relate the “birth of freedom,” embodied in the form of the epic hero Moses (Charlton Heston). Framed by the director’s on-screen introduction, the film follows Moses’ career from his birth among the enslaved Hebrews of Egypt to his banishment to the desert, to his eventual return to Egypt as the agent of an avenging God. As an agent of this God’s will, he ultimately succeeds in freeing his fellow Israelites from the pharaoh Rameses (Yul Brynner), after which he is granted the Ten Commandments. The film ends with the Hebrews crossing the Jordan, while Moses departs to be reunited with God off-screen.

The central ambivalences of the film become clear from the moment that DeMille opens it with his famous introductory remarks. DeMille states that “the theme of this picture is whether men should be ruled by God’s law, or by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God?” While DeMille frames his discourse in a freedom vs. enslavement binary, his words reveal a fundamental instability. That is to say, his statement still accepts the fact that man must be *ruled* by a power greater than himself. As I shall demonstrate in this discussion of the film, Moses, supposedly the wellspring of freedom and free will, finds himself subjected to the divine will of Jehovah.

This ambivalence becomes clearer in the program released with the film, in which DeMille argues that “Armies are mighty. Atom bombs are mighty. Ideologies born of blind pride and passion are mighty. But the Truth of God is mightier than all—and it shall prevail” (n.p.n.). Several lines later, he states that the fate of the nation’s children and grandchildren, whether they will “die in bondage or live in liberty under the Law,” depends upon whether the dictates laid

down in the Ten Commandments are followed. In the first sequence of comparisons, DeMille draws an explicit connection between the power of the atomic bomb and the power of God that his rhetoric struggles to contain within a vision of free will and human agency. DeMille wrestles with a rhetorical bind of his own creation. Faced with the reality that completely unrestrained freedom is not only an impossibility but also a spiritual liability—here, his rhetoric taps into and reworks the theological contradiction between free will and predetermination—he finds himself forced to acknowledge the necessity of imposing a law upon the spirit of mankind. Though that law may be enshrined under the aegis of the protective (if also vengeful) power of God, that does not lessen its menace. DeMille's insistence that God's power is mightier even than the atom bomb betrays an acknowledgment of its terror and the pressure it places on individual human agency.

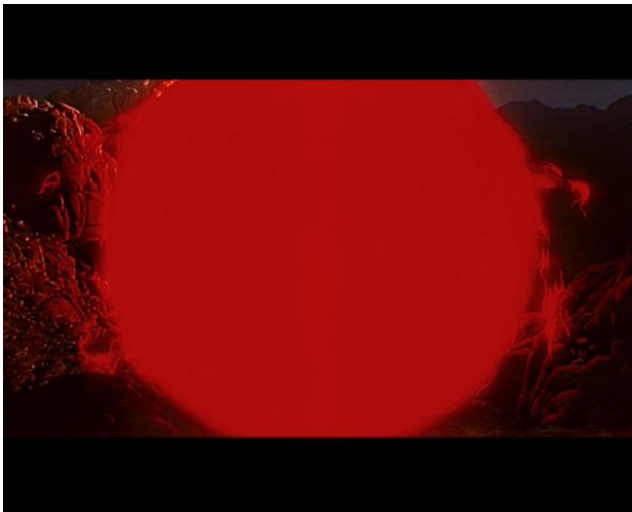
The biblical passages included in the program contain allusions to the ominous and terrifying power of the Old Testament God. Phrases such as “there were thunders and lightings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, because the Lord descended upon it in fire, and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly,” echo and tap into prevailing images of nuclear destruction. And this shadow of atomic apocalypse hangs over *The Ten Commandments* within the film itself. The opening credits unfurl against a deep red background, a color that will later find its echo not only in the robe that Moses adopts after his submission to God and to his identity as one of the Hebrews—both of which are reminders of how little control Moses ultimately has over his own destiny—but also in the red cloud that perpetually hovers over Mount Sinai. Moses' wife Sephora (Yvonne De Carlo) intones that “the mountain rumbles when God is there, and the earth trembles, and the cloud is red with fire.” The atomic overtones of Sinai become increasingly more ominous as Moses stays longer in the lands

of Midian, with a dark red cloud slowly rising up from its peak to cast a similarly rosy glow over Moses' face, a reminder of the growing presence of God and the inevitable historical destiny that will continue to move him as the film progresses.

A sense of historical inevitability also permeates the opening scenes of the film, as Yochabel (Martha Scott) believes that she has given birth to the one who will ultimately fulfill his destiny as the savior of the Hebrew people. As she puts it later in the film, she is honored to have given birth to one *through whom* the God of Israel will work His will, an acknowledgment of a power to which Moses' agency must constantly remain subservient and to which it will consistently be sublimated. Moses acknowledges the binding power of this destiny when he tells his foster-mother Bithia (Nina Foch) that he must follow it, noting in reference to the Hebrew cloth that "this is the binding tie [...] I do not know what power shapes my way, but my feet are set upon a road that I must follow." These words find their echo when Joshua reminds Moses that it is God's will that continues to inexorably move him toward his destiny.

After his exile from Egypt, Moses descends into the realm of the outcast and the wanderer. As he stumbles across a blasted landscape eerily reminiscent of the post-apocalyptic vistas of the atomic imagination, DeMille's voice of God narration dictates the action. This voice constantly reminds the viewer of Moses' lack of agency. He cannot, for example, "bless or curse the power that moves him, for he does not know from where it comes." After outlining a litany of the sufferings that Moses endures at the hand of God and the natural world through which he staggers, the voiceover triumphantly announces that Moses has become the "metal" that "is ready for the maker's hand." Moses' body and spirit have been broken and reduced to little more than a receptacle for the divine will that will increasingly take ownership of him.

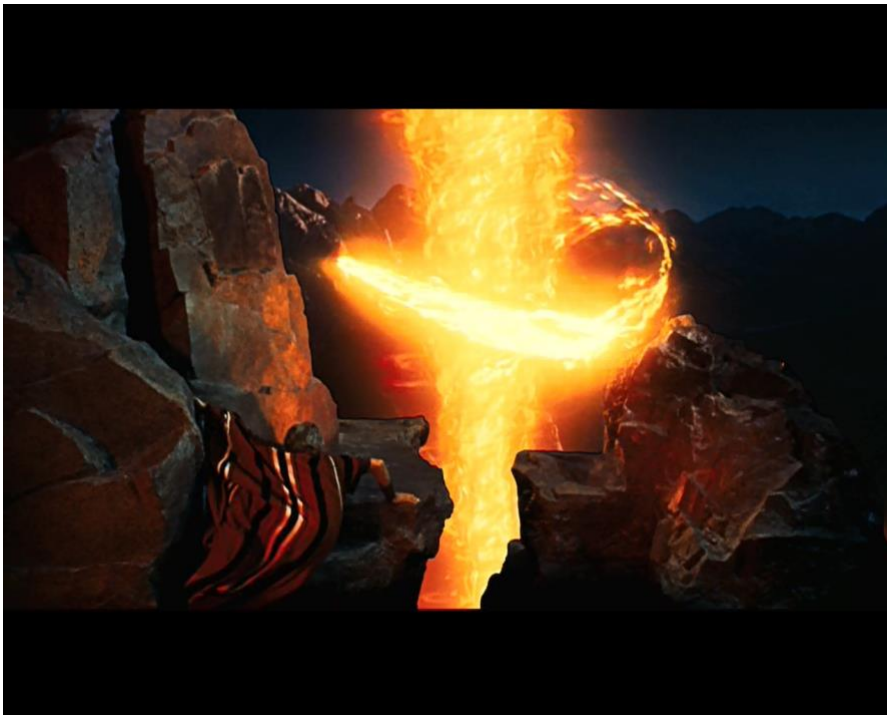
The scene in which Moses encounters the voice in the burning bush heightens not just the tension between agency and subjection but also brings to the surface the way in which the divine and the atomic had become wedded in the postwar imagination. Here, the burning bush (and later the pillar of fire) becomes the only way the film can visually represent the supreme Father and the law that He dis-embodies. The film renders him into an icon that evokes the terror of the absolute ineffability of the divine and the atomic imagery used to represent him. When, later in the film, God the Father delivers the Commandments, sparks of flame streak out and carve them into the rock face. Most striking, however, is the moment when the fiery hand of God actually flies into the camera itself, obliterating the viewer's vision in a cascade of flame (*figure 1*). The Law, and the fiery terror out of which it emerges, become wedded in the film, and it is out of this moment that Moses emerges as the ultimate vessel of a will that is not his own. It is only by submission to this divine terror that Moses, and the Hebrew people, can attain freedom from the Egyptians.



*Figure 1. Heavenly atomic fire obliterates the world.*

This divinity inflects its power upon Moses' body, his submission taking over his bodily controls; it so overcomes him that he ultimately prostrates himself in front of the burning bush--

and, later, must avert his gaze from the searing fire that burns the Ten Commandments into the stone tablets. Even Heston's monumental physicality is no match for the overwhelming power of the Hebrew God. Steven Cohan argues that "Yahweh ('I am') inscribes 'THE LAW' of His presence on Moses' body [...] Moses then becomes so fully realized an effect of Yahweh's patriarchy, the perfect subject of 'I am,' that he cedes all human will, all sexual desire, to 'THE LAW'" (*Masked* 145). Cohan demonstrates the extent to which Moses has been forced to abrogate his volition. Every action he takes, as well as those he cannot, stems from his submission to a will both alien to his own and ultimately ineffable (*figure 2*). The perfect epic hero for the atomic age, Heston/Moses has become both a powerful agent of the divine and a subject of a will not his own.



*Figure 2. Moses' agency is displaced onto his fiery God.*

When he returns from Mount Sinai after his first encounter with God, the exchange of looks among Sephora, Joshua, and Moses, combined with Moses' whitened hair, indicates the

extent to which he has become something other than human. As Erica Sheen puts it, “Moses’ face *keeps* changing, *keeps* recording for us the presence of that absolute other outside the frame [...] Moses’ face is thus both *our* mark of the presence outside the frame of the face of God and our covenant of the conversion that widescreen cinema offered its spectators” (311). When he emerges from his later meeting with God at which he receives the Ten Commandments, Joshua announces that the light of God shines out from him, a final indicator that he has become the embodiment of the punishing Law, his own agency subordinated to a greater force. As the representative of the vengeful power of God, his red-robed body meshing with a blood-red sky, this new Moses deals out death and judgment to his fellow Hebrews who have fallen into idolatry. The film attempts to imbue his punishing wrath with divine sanction, but to a modern sensibility the punishment, with its all or nothing mentality, reads as excessive and terrifying, a reminder of the imminence/immanence of the possibility of atomic destruction in the world outside the film.

While his encounter with God grants Moses a measure of power that he can then use in his mission to liberate his fellow Hebrews from bondage to the Egyptians, his own ability to effect change remains firmly limited by the will of the force that he has given up his humanity to serve. When, for example, Nefertiri (Anne Baxter) pleads with him to spare her son from the avenging angel of death, he tells her it is not he that speaks with God, but God that speaks to, and works through, him. When he subsequently calls out to his master to grant him the ability to do as she asked, his strangled voice serves as an aural reminder of his own divided consciousness as well as a reminder of the increasing irrelevance of his residual humanity. Whatever wishes Moses as a man may have, they remain subordinated to the somewhat arbitrary whim of the

angry God of the Hebrews, one whose wrath has no consideration for the lives of the mortals that He takes with such impunity.

Moses also remains helpless to prevent the descent of the dark angel of death that sweeps in to strike down the firstborn of the Egyptians. The noxious green mist that descends from the sky and creeps along the ground claiming all it touches contains uncanny resemblances to the fallout that hovered at the edge of American consciousness. As Bruce Feller notes in an interview with Katherine Orrison, the prevailing wisdom of the age suggested that nuclear fallout was so terrifying because it could permeate “every nook and cranny of every house or shelter,” a silent but deadly and unstoppable menace” (231). The screams and cries that rend the air as the Egyptians are struck down are not only an unsettling echo of those of the Hebrews earlier in the film, but also terrifying reminders of the implacability of the wave of death sweeping down upon every Egyptian firstborn. Like the men and women sitting in the audience, Moses remains unable to prevent or save those who have already been marked for death by the avenging hand of God. All that he can do is hunker down with his fellow Israelites in their dwellings while the shadow passes over them, thankful that their lives have been spared. While the film has already attempted to code the Egyptians’ deaths as the result of Rameses’ intransigence, to a modern audience they still contain notes of the ominous, implacable terror of the atomic bomb.

Given the fact that the film has, for most of its duration, emphasized the struggle for the Israelites to find freedom from the tyranny of Egypt, it comes as something of a surprise that the film’s conclusion is unable to represent the actual culmination of the nation-building that is the ostensible end-point of the narrative. The film ends not with the explicit founding of the new state of Israel, but instead with the Israelites just crossing the Jordan, the longing for complete freedom and stability infinitely deferred. The Israelites will continue to be subject to the whims

of a God they cannot see. It is thus not just individual agency that has been undercut, but that of an entire people. The film's deferral of a final ending that would see the fruition of Moses' efforts is in some sense not surprising, given that it was made in a period in which the future had been permanently endangered by the atomic bomb. In its refusal of closure, the film also calls into question the very function of an ending; if, according to those like Kermode, the provision of a temporal conclusion in fiction renders the rest of narrative explicable, the absence of such closure in *The Ten Commandments* reveals the tremendous pressure induced by an apocalypse understood to be both immanent and imminent.

Nor does Moses get to enjoy the fruits of his labor to bring them into their own land, for while he can see the Promised Land in the distance, the injunction of his God prevents him from entering it. He has not only given up the things that made him human; he has also given up the very world that his sacrifices made possible. For that matter, he does not even get to reunite with God on-screen. In denying Moses the fruits of his heroic labors, *The Ten Commandments* ultimately exposes the fundamental uncertainty of human agency of those living in the shadow of apocalypse. Despite its ostensible triumphalist message, the film is curiously reluctant to allow Moses, the epitome of freedom, the chance to encounter in the film's reality the fulfilment of either his personal or political life.

When, in the end, Moses appears similar to both the Statue of Liberty and the sculpture of Moses by Michelangelo, the film renders explicit the fact that he has left the realm of the human and entered into realm of the purely symbolic.<sup>6</sup> While *The Ten Commandments* desperately wants to assert that Moses is the embodiment of freedom and human agency, it also cannot escape the oppression of the divine law that it has so consistently emphasized. When Sephora proclaims him God's torch, she acknowledges that as a human, Moses no longer matters; his



own individuality, his dreams, and his earthly aspirations have been sacrificed in the name of the heroic destiny he has been ordained to follow. While he may have effected the liberation of the Hebrews, he has done so only as the agent of the Hebrew God.

### The Terror of Contingency in *Ben-Hur*

If God erupts into the flow of human time in the context of *The Ten Commandments*, he hovers on the edge of the frame in Heston's next epic outing, *Ben-Hur*. While the latter film does not exhibit the same explicit atomic imagery of *The Ten Commandments*, it does utilize its narrative to raise a series of questions regarding the extent to which the individual can affect either his own destiny or those around him in either the atomic age or the New Testament era. Although its ending relies upon the narrative closure of rebirth and reunion, the satisfaction they supposedly offer remain undercut by the fact that Judah remains unable to effect or implement his own agency as a historical actant. Instead, he relies upon the contingency of chance, here attributed narratively to either the intercession of God the Father or the sacrifice of the Son, revealing that for the atomic age epic, human agency is ultimately displaced onto the divine, even when that power remains diegetically invisible.

The film follows the Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) as he struggles against the tyranny of Rome. This conflict finds expression in his deeply emotional conflict with his childhood friend Messala (Stephen Boyd), who, in retaliation for Judah's unwillingness to side with Rome against his fellow Jews, ultimately imprisons his mother and sister and sends Judah to the galleys. After years of brutal enslavement, Judah escapes slavery, defeats Messala in a chariot race (in which the latter dies) and, after further trial, reunites with his mother and sister, who are in turn healed of leprosy upon Christ's crucifixion. The film also juxtaposes Christ's

journey to the Cross with Judah's own physical and spiritual journey, and the numerous meetings between the two characters provides the catalyst for many of the film's most significant dramatic moments.

The film begins with a close-up of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, and William Fitzgerald suggests that this classic painting brings into focus many of the film's recurring themes. The camera focuses on the gap between the outstretched finger of Adam and that of God, highlighting the fact that the promised fulfillment of Judah's destiny will remain infinitely deferred, a frustration which permeates much of the film: Ben-Hur remains separated from Messala; he cannot do anything to save or even touch his mother and sister after their imprisonment and illness; he cannot retaliate against the Roman tribune Arrius' (Jack Hawkins) taunts on the galley; he cannot even kill Messala after the fateful chariot race (39). It also visualizes the film's central problem regarding agency; just as Adam lies recumbent, reliant upon God the Father to breathe life into his prone body, so Judah must always rely on others to grant him the agency the film denies him. And, just as Michelangelo's painting captures the physical tension of Adam's reaching out without fully gaining mastery over his own subjectivity, so the film repeatedly offers Judah the possibility of changing his destiny of his own volition, only to immediately foreclose on that potential.

From the beginning, the world in which Judah lives limits his agency. For example, though as a member of a princely Jewish family he possesses wealth and privilege, he remains ensconced and contained by the Roman occupation of Judaea (McAlister 61). While the film personalizes this conflict via the fraught relationship between Messala and Judah, it also makes clear that the latter's struggles are part of a general feeling of powerlessness among the populace. When his sister Tirzah (Cathy O'Donnell) knocks loose a tile and inadvertently unhorses and

injures the new Roman governor, she sets off a sequence of events that culminates in her imprisonment (along with her mother) and Judah's sentencing to the galleys. Judah fails to keep any of this from happening, first because the Romans refuse to believe the falling tile was an accident, and later because even his imposing physical threats to Messala will only result in the crucifixion of his mother and sister. Heston/Judah's imposing physicality—including the always-repressed violence that so impressed Mourlet—avails him little as the Romans lead him and his family away to a life of enslavement and a living death in the dungeons.<sup>7</sup> Judah's fate, then, remains the result of contingent events that he can neither predict nor prevent.

Events continue to slip, and remain, beyond Judah's control as he becomes one of what Robert Burgoyne has termed the subalterns of the empire, first as a slave forced to march across the desert and then as one chained to an oar in the galleys (85). The first shot of Judah as a galley slave shows him as almost indistinguishable from his fellow slaves, reduced to nothing more than a number, and Arrius reinforces this sense by consistently referring to him merely as "Forty One" (*figure 3*). Judah becomes so disempowered that his ability to survive the ramming of the ship occurs not because of anything he has specifically done, but only because the capricious Arrius decides to leave him unchained during the ensuing battle. Judah admits his own bafflement at this moment of seeming kindness, remarking to another slave that he does not know why the tribune decided to unchain him, just as he does not know why another mysterious man (Jesus) offered him water when he was perishing on that march across the desert. As was the case with Moses, forces that Judah cannot know, name, or understand continue to move him inexorably toward his destiny. Like his Old Testament predecessor, he remains reliant upon the Father of his people to effect his escape from servitude. And like the Hebrew prophet of old, he is often powerless to help others, as when he realizes he can do nothing to save the slaves held in

bondage within the ship that saves him and Arrius from the open ocean. His glimpse into the belly of the ship—where he sees other men chained to a life of servitude—only heightens his awareness of his powerlessness and how it was only a moment of contingency that he was freed from his own enslavement.



*Figure 3. The anonymity of slavery.*

A similar form of ambiguity runs as a through-line in the entire film, right into the chariot race. At the beginning of the race, for example, Judah calls upon the God of his fathers to guide him, saying “Into your hands I commit my life. Do with me as you will.” On one level, the aesthetics of the chariot race emphasize the sheer power inherent in Judah/Heston’s imposing physicality, a sense reinforced by the dexterity of the cinematography and editing, which work together to engender a feeling of embodied agency. Judah’s initial success underscores the fact that this moment represents a resuscitation of the embattled masculinity that has been so damaged by his trials as a galley slave.

However, the climax of the race ultimately highlights the lack of control that Judah has over the events of his life. While he does attain the revenge he seeks when Messala succumbs to

a fatal accident, that mishap is as much a result of the Roman's own vicious actions as they are anything Judah does, as his attempt to derail the Jewish prince ends up backfiring. When the Roman's chariot shatters, he is sent sprawling into the dust to be trampled, his body broken by his own ruthless desire to destroy. This is in marked contrast to the novel, in which Judah is directly responsible for wrecking Messala's chariot, a premeditated act which cripples (but does not kill) his former friend. The willingness of the novel's Judah to enact violence on his enemy associates him with the hero of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century western, so that it is "this cathartic act of violence, that leaves Ben-Hur ready to embrace Christianity" (Malamud 138). The film, on the other hand, asserts that Judah's fulfilled quest for vengeance results as much from the whims of fate (or perhaps the guiding hand of God the Father) as it does from his own agency and that it will be his ability to accept powerlessness that will enact his redemption.

This agency remains circumscribed after his success at the circus, for though he finds his mother and sister in the Valley of the Lepers, he does not have the ability to save them from their fate. When he follows Esther (Haya Harareet) to see them, he must hide behind a boulder while his beloved takes her load of food to the wretched mother and sister. The organization of the figures in this widescreen composition ensures that both Judah and his mother are in the frame together, heightening the dramatic tension and underscoring Judah's impotence (*figure 4*). Though his features bear witness to his inner turmoil, his body writhing with the strain of repressed emotion and forced inaction, he remains unable to help them in any meaningful way or even to reveal his presence to them. Heston's imposing physique, statuesque as it is, intertwines impotency with agency.



*Figure 4. The widescreen composition captures Judah's anguished impotence.*

Judah's offering up of his own agency into the hands of his divine Father before the chariot race find its echo in the end of the film, when he tells his mother and sister that he "felt his [Christ's] voice take the spear out of my hand." Rather than simply masculinizing Jesus, as some have suggested, I argue that this moment reveals the extent to which the film's attempt to mitigate the anxiety of impotence ultimately evokes it, as the agency of the hero is constantly displaced *onto* Jesus, suggesting that the epic hero can do little to alter the course of events, either personally or politically (Pentz-Harris, Seger, and Palmer 126). The reunion and the healing are the result not of his actions, but of the sacrifice of Christ. While the ending is clearly coded as uplifting and intends to validate the sacrifices and suffering that Judah has endured as a proxy for Jesus—who remains largely off-screen—it remains troubled by the inability of Judah to effect any lasting or meaningful change in the historical world that he inhabits.

This ending of the 1959 film is also in marked contrast to the novel which, in general, grants Judah significantly more agency in his world. At the novel's conclusion, he decides to go to Rome, where his wealth allows him to build the catacombs that will serve as a refuge from

Christians fleeing the persecutions of the Roman state. Wallace's Ben-Hur is a man determined to seize control of his destiny, and his willingness to go to Rome itself—rather than abandoning it, as the film's hero does—indicates his willingness to change the world in which he lives and his ability to take material action to protect his fellow Christians. By contrast, Heston's Ben-Hur retreats into the realm of the home, and the film contents itself with restoring the family but doing little to rescue the material world.

Simmering beneath the surface of this most uplifting of epic films is an awareness of the futility of human agency in the atomic age. Timothy Melley has eloquently written of the potent and widespread “agency panic” that afflicted those living in postwar America, which he defines as “an intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy of self-control—the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been ‘constructed’ by powerful external agents” (12). Judah Ben-Hur similarly finds his actions controlled by others, and while he may not be as explicitly a vessel for the divine will as Moses, he does nevertheless become the means by which Christ's message of sacrifice is enacted among his followers. His life has a purpose, but it is one which he largely cannot determine for himself.

#### Messianic Ambivalence in *King of Kings* (1961)

If Christ hovers just outside the frame in *Ben-Hur*, he becomes the hero of his own epic film in Nicholas Ray's 1961 film *King of Kings*. Emerging as it did in a culture trembling at the prospect of nuclear self-destruction and the seeming imminence of that annihilation (to reference the review with which I began this chapter), this film renders visible the terror of living in historical time embedded within the Christ narrative. Ultimately, the film's desire to humanize Christ and to locate him in the specificity of the ancient Roman world renders him subject to the

intertwined forces of a divinely ordained sacrifice (he has been sent by his Father for that purpose) and the profane, historical forces of ancient Rome (which demand that he die for sedition against the state). Though he is, theologically speaking, the Son of God and thus supposedly the redeemer of secular history, the film's reluctance to represent that redeemed world in concrete, visual form exposes the inability of the narrative ending, however superficially uplifting it may be, to fully resolve the historical tensions of either the diegetic or extra-diegetic world.

Set in the context of the Roman conquest and occupation of Judaea, the film follows not only Jesus (Jeffrey Hunter) as he embarks on his ministry, but also his contemporary Barabbas (Harry Guardino), who believes in the efficacy of armed conflict in expelling the Romans; Judas (Rip Torn), who finds himself with divided loyalties between Jesus and Barabbas; and even Herod Antipas (Frank Thring), who desperately seeks some deeper meaning to his debauched life. Situated in the midst of this historical context, Christ is ensnared by the Romans, who ultimately crucify him. The film ends when, resurrected from the dead, Christ appears to his followers, his shadow falling in the shape of a giant cross.

*King of Kings*, though not an enormous financial success upon its release in 1961, was heralded by at least a few reviewers as a significant achievement on the part of the director. Others, however, criticized the film for its tendency to marginalize Christ in what should have been his own narrative. Bosley Crowther's review is typical in this respect: "the drama of Jesus—the drama that is outlined sketchily in the limited reports in the Scriptures and hints in Roman history—is strangely lost or confused or omitted in this peculiarly impersonal film that constructs a great deal of random action around Jesus and does very little to construct a living personality for Him" (SM10). For Crowther, one aspect of the genre (the crowds, the battles, the



strife) overshadows and undercuts the other, more important one (the epic hero's search for his destiny).

As Crowther sensed, the film puts two temporal threads into conflict. One strand of the film portrays Christ as a timeless presence that transcends the historical world in which he lives—hence the casting of Jeffrey Hunter, whose physical beauty and piercing blue eyes lend him an aura of almost angelic and otherworldliness. The other, however, emphasizes the importance of the film's historical moment. The souvenir program argues that “amid this barbaric world seethed conflicts of human drama, of violent passions, which tore asunder the high places, and trembled the foundations of false idolatry.” Somewhat later, the book notes that the script “conceive[d] Jesus as living during history's most turbulent period, in a real environment bounded by dates, places, and facts.” (n.p.n). In addition to its apocalyptic overtones (the “barbaric world” in which the words of Christ “tore asunder the high places” and “trembled the foundations”), these sentences also historically situate Jesus. The actions that follow are understood not just as spiritual abstracts, but as having actually occurred in the corporeal world, and Orson Welles' voiceover continues to move each of the characters along, all of them subject to the unsettling experience of living in the stream of forward-moving, historical time.

As both Pamela Grace (2009) and Jason McKahan (2014) observe, the film also highlights two different historical and political visions, offered by Jesus on the one hand and Barabbas on the other. Jesus serves as the prophet of peace, while Barabbas proposes that Rome can only be thrown out of Judaea by the force of arms. Caught up by the latter's promise of an earthly victory over the Roman occupiers, both the apostles and the people of Judaea demand that their newfound prophet demonstrate the types of cataclysmic powers typically associated

with the Yahweh of the Old Testament, and he is frequently asked when or if he will drown the Romans into the sea (a clear allusion to the wrath of God in *The Ten Commandments* and story of the Exodus). Jesus, however, resists and argues against these requests. His message emphasizes the possibility of a world outside of Rome's hegemony and beyond the bounds of secular history, one that stubbornly resists visualization.

At first, Barabbas seems to possess the martial abilities (and the historical agency) that Christ so strenuously eschews, and the film consistently emphasizes his physicality and strong connections to the natural world, as well as his skills as a soldier and leader of armed men (Grace 76). However, his acts of military prowess prove worse than futile. Not only do they not succeed; they result in the slaughter of the very people Barabbas has been trying to save. The film highlights the fact that Barabbas cannot comprehend why it is that Christ ends up dying on the Cross rather than him. "That man is dying in my place. Why should he do that? I never did anything for him." "Deprived of the ability to think, act or even look" by both his failed attempts at throwing off Roman domination and by his animalistic nature (suggested by his rough garments and violent impulses), Barabbas is also denied the possibility of understanding or accessing the escape from the physical, historical world that Christ seemingly offers (Grace 71). Right up until the end, he cannot, or will not, throw off the chains of the material world and thus remains trapped within the confines of history.

The film also paints Judas, often portrayed as the worst betrayer in history, as the necessary historical agent for the inevitable Crucifixion of Christ. His desire to see his fellow Judaeans freed from the yoke of Roman slavery sets him on the path that eventually leads him to betray one of his masters. The film makes clear that he does not intend for Jesus to die; rather, he is motivated by his desire to force him to take up arms against Rome and join Barabbas.

Undermined by the law of unintended consequences, he must stand and watch helplessly as Christ is crucified, his agency once again undercut by his fainting at the sight of his master's brutalized body. His suicide serves as an act of contrition; an escape from the world of Rome, perhaps, but one that renders him the ultimate outcast, bereft of the sacramental aura that hovers over Christ's death a moment before.

The film's reluctance to visually represent most of the miracles heightens its essential ethos of ambiguity. For example, rather than showing Jesus in the act of healing the physically afflicted, the film instead shows the healing occurring in the wake of his passing shadow, or in other cases has the Roman Lucius relate the more extraordinary and powerful of the miracles such as the casting out of the demons and the feeding of the multitudes. In addition to producing ambiguity about just how much power Christ actually possesses, these distancing moments also produce profound doubt within the apostles over their own agency, a powerlessness reflected in their inability and unwillingness to aid their master when he is finally arrested and put on trial. Even Peter, who proclaims himself the most steadfast and loyal of his brethren, cannot do anything to help and denies his master not once but three times.

The crucifixion scene heightens this profound sense of ambiguity. As Pamela Grace notes, the sequence declines to show any overt signs of God, even when Christ calls out for his Father, preferring instead to cut to a shot of the sky (74-75). This moment highlights Jesus' powerlessness before his destiny on the Cross, for just as Moses and Ben-Hur found themselves impotent before a power so great that it could not find direct screen representation, so too does this cinematic savior become subjected to a will not his own. The fact that the thunder and the darkness that greet his death might just as easily be the result of an accident of nature rather than a sign of his divine Father's wrath heightens the sense of uncertainty, raising the uneasy

possibility that his death may have no greater significance than that of the two men dying on crosses beside him. The Crucifixion, ostensibly the end-point of the Christ narrative that grants it its significance, is here tainted with ambiguity.

While the ending of the film—in which the risen Christ’s shadow intersects with a fishing net to create a giant Cross—clearly wants to counteract the sense of powerlessness and historical inevitability engendered by the crucifixion, it ultimately fails to do so conclusively. After all, both Barabbas and Christ remain fundamentally unable to change the course of the events that transpire in their homeland. It is only when Christ enters into the realm of the purely symbolic, when he no longer inhabits the limits of the mortal flesh—doomed to perish either through natural death or through the imposition of outside force—that he can provide a means for others to escape the limits of secular and worldly time. Still, this ultimate escape exists forever beyond the abilities of this one film to fully visually realize it.

Furthermore, I would argue that this final scene remains haunted by a profound sense of what has been given up in the process of Christ’s escape from the bounds of history. As Leon Hunt puts it in his discussion of the male epic, endings such as this are “troubled by a sense of loss, by what the subject gives up in the formation of the ‘more powerful ideal ego’” (81). The context of a nuclear world in which a twinned *belief in* and (in some cases at least) a *desire for* the end of time puts intense pressure onto what should be the most fulfilling ending. Instead of redeeming history, Christ has become its victim, and the sense of loss underscores the fact that the decline and fall of Rome and its tyranny must always remain imminent and never realized. The surviving apostles must continue living in the world of Rome, subject to its terrifying, destructive power.

Idle Worship: *Spartacus* and the Despair of an Unfulfilled Future

I close this chapter with the 1960 film *Spartacus*. Not only is it the bleakest and most straightforwardly despairing of the films I consider here (and indeed of the entire mid-century cycle), but it also situates its narrative outside of the religious framework. As such, it most vividly brings to the forefront the fundamental paradox the epic confronts. Denied even the presence of a sacramental figure such as Christ or a powerful (if ultimately unrepresentable) Old Testament God, the film displaces onto the unrepresented future the abolition of slavery that is the ostensible endpoint of the title character's rebellion. In the end, Spartacus' revolt is not only unsuccessful; the film cannot entirely decide whether his death has any transcendental meaning. The film expresses a profound pessimism about the plausibility of human ability to bring about a better future.

Throughout the film, its various heroes find themselves subjected to powerful physical forces that they cannot resist, their very bodies afflicted with the perils of living in history, and this extends to the lived bodies of the actors. The illustrated story of the film's production notes, for example, that "Death Valley, in the heart of the dreary and desolate California-Nevada wasteland, proved to be almost too close a copy—in heat and hardship—to the Libyan gold mine of the story" (*Spartacus* n.p.n.). And, somewhat later, it notes that "off-stage tribulations [including Tony Curtis's split achilles [sic] tendon and Kirk Douglas' ten-day virus], which occurred with unprecedented frequency throughout the lengthy production, ran the agonies of the hero himself a close second" (n.p.n.). Furthermore, "four men received second-degree burns during the sequence in which burning logs are rolled into the Roman ranks. Another two suffered mild concussions in falls from horses" (n.p.n.). The emphasis on the material conditions of the film's production and on the bodily punishment endured by the actors bringing history into the

modern world, is in keeping with what Vivian Sobchack has called the “surge and splendor” of the Hollywood historical epic. She argues that the labor and materials used to produce the film replicate the monumentality of the subject matter (287-288). I would take this a step further and argue that the highlighting of so many injured bodies echoes and adds to the film’s emphasis on the agency/powerlessness binary. The epic hero’s body focalizes both his historical agency and his inability to break free of subordination before a power greater than his own. At the same time, it is also the point at which that power, whether it be the Old Testament God, the divine presence of Jesus, the tyranny of Rome or, more abstractly, history, can ultimately rob him of his volition.

In keeping with what Leon Hunt describes as the conventions of the epic, the film subjects Douglas’s on-screen body to increasingly rigorous tortures and torments, making Spartacus perhaps the most contradictory and fraught male hero to emerge from the midcentury epic cycle (66-67). This is due in no small part to the numerous artistic and ideological conflicts that plagued the film almost from its inception. As the introduction to the Dalton Trumbo analysis of the film puts it: “Kirk Douglas wanted a larger than life hero that would enhance his stature as an actor and star [...] Fast wanted a pure, principled revolutionary to personify the ageless revolt of the oppressed against the oppressor. Director Stanley Kubrick, the master of cinematic cynicism, wanted a conflicted wretch, who was finally destroyed by the horror of bloody battle” (qtd. in Paul 175). These disagreements would shape the ways in which the character Spartacus emerged from the film, a hero that contains within him a measure of each of these three competing visions.

The opening sequence makes clear that Spartacus is nothing more than a cog in the Roman slavery machine. The voiceover also notes that Spartacus’ story unfolds before the birth

of Christianity and its possibilities for a better world, and that the system of slavery existed beyond the end of Rome. Though the voiceover promises that one day slavery will finally die, it also reveals that such a death will not happen within the context of the film the viewer is about to see. The hero's quest is doomed from the outset, as signified by Spartacus' easily thwarted attempts at rebellion, after which the Roman slave masters sentence him to death.

*Spartacus* repeatedly circumscribes and limits the title character's agency and that of the men he leads, and a pattern gradually emerges pairing moments of action with haunting moments of affliction. In one of the film's most iconic scenes, the slave Draba (Woody Strode) refuses to kill Spartacus in the arena, choosing instead to throw his trident at the watching Romans. When he then attempts to climb the wall and attack them, he is first pierced by a spear and then fatally stabbed by the dispassionate and ruthless Crassus (Laurence Olivier). Ina Rae Hark argues that this moment is emblematic of the film's troubled relationship to masculinity, in that Draba's rebellion does not, as it might at first seem, intend to disrupt the system in which the men are the object of the gaze, but is instead indicative of one of the film's central gendered problems. In order to break free of the system that renders them into objects of the gaze, the gladiators must become akin to the very Romans who have rendered them into these mindless, animal-like killing machines in the first place (159-160). Draba's rebellious act, stirring as it might be, ultimately occurs within the bounds of the *ludus* and as such can never do anything *but* fail, as the subsequent scenes make clear. Having been dispatched by Crassus, Draba's lifeless body is hung upside down as a potent symbol not only for the gladiators—who will later rally around its memory—but also for the audience, who would no doubt have been aware of the Civil Rights Movement and, just as importantly, the prevalence of racial violence and the not-so-distant practice of lynching.

While the film initially sets up the belief that Spartacus and his army may succeed in their efforts to escape from Italy and the purview of Rome, it also defers that success, unable to visually represent a world wherein genuine and unfettered historical agency is possible. Though they achieve spectacular military victories against every Roman army sent against them, the geography of Italy keeps them penned up within the bounds of Roman influence. When, for example, the Cilician pirate Tigranes (Herbert Lom) reminds Spartacus that he has all of Italy to cross if he hopes to escape from Rome, a map in the background serves as a visual reminder of just *how much* distance there is to cover, and it remains unlikely that they will be able to accomplish this journey. Though their military victories promise them the possibility of escape, the film ultimately forecloses on these utopian promises.

Spartacus' defiant proclamation that "death is the only freedom a slave knows" rings all too true by the end of the film. While Spartacus optimistically suggests that this lack of fear will enable the victory they all seek, his words also underscore the inherent lack of agency within the system of slavery. Some scholars suggest that this is in keeping with Kubrick's directorial vision of the world, wherein "human weakness and/or malice along with chance are always standing in the wings ready to disrupt the best-laid plans that his heroes or anti-heroes can devise" (Philips 98). One can see this particular ambivalence emerge in numerous moments in the film, including Spartacus's angry declaration to Crassus that the dead Antoninus (Tony Curtis) will return "and he'll be millions," which rings more than slightly hollow given the fact that no further rebellion occurs within the film's narrative. Spartacus, though he remains unbowed and unbroken throughout the film, is powerless to effect the change he wants to see in the Roman world.

Even the famous "I'm Spartacus!" scene (surely one of the film's most iconic), is riddled with ambiguity, and Joanna Paul suggests that this moment "serves to reinforce Spartacus' lack



of individuality” (211). If, as Burgoyne argues, this moment allows Spartacus to ascend into the realm of the symbolic and thus to become a beacon of freedom to those who come afterward, it is only after he has given up his earthly, embodied existence (94). In the end, *Spartacus* suggests that the possibility of human agency always remains circumscribed by the world of the flesh. Only when the mortal hero has been elevated to the status of a symbol—when he has, in other words, given up any hope that his corporeal body will be able to effect historical change—can he become a rallying cry for others. In the visual system of the film, such a rallying cry is always something that happens *after the film is over*, rather than in the diegetic moment.

While *Spartacus* attempts to imbue the hero’s death with an aura of Christ-like sacramentality, this aura is undercut by both Spartacus’s abjection on the cross and the clear fact that his rebellion was futile. Crassus remains utterly triumphant, Spartacus’s fellow slaves have all been crucified in order to provide an example, and his wife, while free of Crassus, has also been parted from him and escapes in the company of the cowardly Batiatus (Peter Ustinov). Even Gracchus (Charles Laughton), the one Roman who seemed to have the morals that Crassus so conspicuously lacks, opts to commit suicide rather than live in the Roman world that his rival intends to construct in his own image.

The inability of the film to visually represent an ideal future world is part of what Ina Rae Hark refers to as the film’s “future perfect” strategy, one that can “represent a happy ending only as a parody.” She goes on to argue that the film, for all that it wants to liberate Spartacus from the dehumanizing influences of both his identity as a slave and the cruel manipulations and depredations of Crassus, cannot represent this utopia that it so clearly desires (168-169). Likewise, according to Alison Futrell, the “grim resolution of the final scene” in which “hope and resistance coalesce in the crucifixion of the father and the flight of the son” is “only partially

offset by the verbal references to future freedom” (111). While part of this uncertainty has to do with the film’s troubled production history, I suggest that it also reveals the fundamental struggle, and ultimate failure, of the historico-biblical epic to come to terms with the ever-present and irresolvable challenge posed by the immanent/imminent threat of atomic end.

Underlying the future perfect strategy lies a deep ambivalence about the possibility of human agency on the historical stage and about the composition of the future. The final shots of the film twin the image of the physically afflicted Spartacus with the escape of the mother/son dyad and the cowardly (i.e., nonmasculine) Batiatus, all of whom represent a different world made possible by Spartacus’ death. In both novel and film, the possibility of change remains infinitely deferred, displaced on to the generations that will come. The atomic context forces the film to acknowledge the futility of action in the present while hoping, perhaps fruitlessly, that some future, even a flawed and imperfect one, may emerge from this failure.

The ending of *Spartacus* is striking in part because of its difference from *King of Kings*, for while the former continues to put the afflicted male body on display, the latter removes him from the visual plane. For this reason, I read it somewhat differently than other scholars who have addressed the film, who see in Spartacus’ death a symbolic resolution of the film’s contradictions. For example, Robert Burgoyne argues that “the translation of the body of the male slave into the person of the epic hero highlights the performative aspect of masculinity in the epic cinema, a performance that must resolve symbolic contradictions between slavery and masculinity, between individual subordination and collective agency” (86). Here, I wish to point out how those contradictions remain frustratingly unresolved by the film’s parodic (to use Hark’s term) and grim (to use Futrell’s) ending. While Varinia promises that Spartacus’s son will grow to adulthood knowing of his father’s brave sacrifice, the film’s ending, like the ending of so

many epic films of the midcentury cycle, also acknowledges the impossibility of representing the better world the hero's sacrifice has supposedly rendered possible. The opening voiceover casts a long shadow, a pessimistic reminder that Spartacus' rebellion was, in the end, a failed one, that it would be two more millennia before slavery finally ended. Even Howard Fast's novel, which possesses a more explicitly revolutionary consciousness, acknowledges that Spartacus' son is likewise doomed to continue the cycle that his father has begun. Just as Spartacus was ultimately unable to overthrow the yoke of Roman slavery—or even to take his fellow slaves into a place that exists beyond Rome's purview—so his son also engages in a futile rebellion, doomed to repeat the same process. He remains enmeshed in a cycle of repetition that, unlike that theorized by Eliade, keeps him from ever attaining the agency he desires.

#### The Slaughter-Bench of History

If these films struggle to visualize a viable human future and convey the fraught nature of heroic agency in the atomic age, they also confront the terrifying nature of the recent past through the visualization of mass death. On the one hand, the sight of so many bodies being slaughtered, particularly that of the Jewish characters, taps into the very recent memory of the Holocaust, which had resulted in the death of six million European Jews. On the other, it clearly evokes and cannot escape the fact that the advent of 20<sup>th</sup> Century modernity has been accompanied by the mass death of millions of people in war, all of whom have fallen, as Eliade would have put it, into the path of history. The death toll in World War II alone was unprecedented in the modern world, and the atomic bomb threatened to destroy untold millions more.

*The Ten Commandments* contains five instances of mass human destruction: the murder of the Hebrew babies on the order of Pharaoh; the divine wrath which brings about the suffering of the Egyptians; the taking of the lives of the Egyptian firstborn, the drowning of Rameses' army in the Red Sea; and the moment when the wrathful Moses casts down the tablets and the earth opens to swallow the idolatrous revelers. While the film works overtime to code these deaths as either necessary for the working of Biblical prophecy (in the case of the murder of the Hebrew children) or justified by the divine (as with the plight of the Egyptians), these moments also contain a note of ambivalence about such wanton destruction. It is hard not to feel a moment of terror when the full wrath of Yahweh descends upon those who have brought down his displeasure.

Such ambivalence was an established part of DeMille's *oeuvre*. The ruination of the Temple of Dagon in *Samson and Delilah*, for example, combines the thrill of destruction with the terror of the loss of life. Just as Charlton Heston's/Moses' body bears the marks of his fulfillment of a historical destiny and acknowledges the terrifying possibility of a loss of agency and an inhabitation of the position of the subordinate, so these moments of great destruction serve as poignant disruptions that resist the film's moralizing attempts at closure. An acknowledgment of the barbarity of history bubbles to the surface to trouble and complicate the triumph of the epic hero's destiny. These moments provoke what Gilles Deleuze refers to as a sort of Olympian laughter, a mixture (as Jonathan Stubbs puts it), of the terrifyingly sublime and the absurd (142). I will return to this sequence in more detail in chapter three.

*Ben-Hur*, the most optimistic of the epics in this chapter, also cannot entirely shake this pessimism. As they march across the desert, at least one of the slaves accompanying Judah falls victim to the heat and is summarily dispatched, his body left in the desert sun. Judah is also the

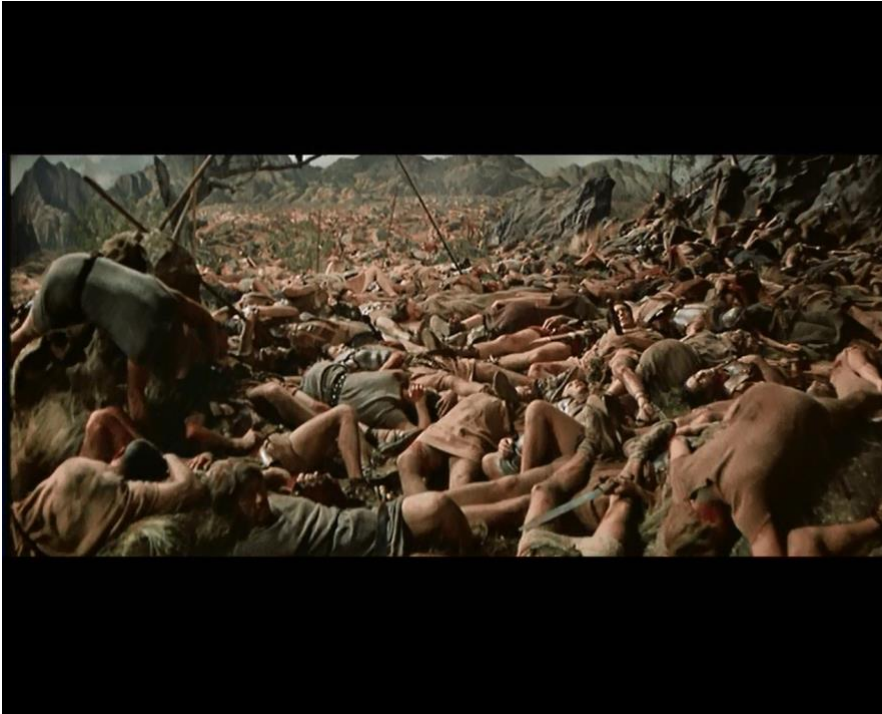
only surviving slave from the doomed Roman ship; his fellow slaves become the human detritus left in the wake of the fulfillment of his historic destiny. And of course, there are also the other racers who perish in chariot accidents, as well as the lepers who, unlike Judah's mother and sister, presumably remain unhealed by Christ's sacrifice. The film cannot escape the fact that mass death and destruction haunt the journey of the epic hero and may in fact be necessary to the construction of his image.

Messala's death, clearly intended as the culmination of Judah's earthly search for vengeance and the ultimate sign of his reclamation of his historical agency, also contains a sense of sadness and futility. Messala's broken body not only "offset[s] the emotional satisfaction of good's triumph over evil" but also highlights the brutality and death that often accompany the fulfillment of a heroic destiny such as Judah's (Forshey 53). His dying taunt that "it goes on. The race is not over" further underscores the pointless bloodiness of history and the belief that the epic hero remains doomed to maintain his status as an impotent figure, condemned to relive the same cycle of pyrrhic victory and overt defeat over and over again. The Roman's final words speak "of a rivalry even death cannot end" (Hark 175).

For its part, *King of Kings* also cannot escape the specter of genocide and wanton death. The opening voiceover, for example, notes that Herod's ascent to the throne is marked by a wave of crucifixions and purges, with the attendant mass death of Jewish subjects. Numerous subsequent scenes show the bodies of the victims being thrown into fires or mass burials, images that clearly echo the horrors of the Holocaust. While this is this world that Christ has supposedly come to redeem, his crucifixion and its attendant ambiguities undercut that sense of escape from the vicissitudes of ancient history. The parallelism the film establishes in its opening shots

illustrates that Christ remains victimized by the very historical world in which he has been born, his body subjected to the very real and historical method of execution.

*Spartacus* most viscerally and violently brings this attention to mass death to the fore. After Crassus's crushing defeat of the rebels, the camera fetishistically dwells on the bodies of the dead that lie strewn across the battlefield. Though many of the individuals remain nameless, several have occupied at least some space in the narrative. For example, when Antoninus recites a poetic verse, the film takes pains to individualize his audience, to show how such a song, with its emphasis on the pleasures of peace, appeals to a diverse and humble humanity. Similar incidents include Spartacus's tour of the camp the night before the battle, as well as the moment when he gives his inspirational speech to his gathered soldiers. In the latter, he encourages them with the hope that victory, and righteousness, are on their side in the forthcoming confrontation with Rome, and the camera allows Spartacus (and, through him, the presumptive viewer) to see the individual faces of these men and women who have thrown in their lot with his. It is therefore all the more devastating when the camera cuts from the heat of battle to its aftermath, showing the landscape strewn with the lifeless corpses of many of those same men, women, and children (*figures 5 and 6*). This scene, perhaps more than any other in the midcentury cycle of historico-biblical epics, brings to the fore the terror of history's flux, what Ruiz, riffing on Hegel, refers to as the "slaughter bench of humanity" (10).



*Figures 5 and 6. “The slaughter-bench of humanity.”*

The visibility of such mass death—particularly of Jewish characters—is especially significant given that, as Alan Mintz and Peter Novick have demonstrated, the Holocaust was

frequently downplayed in American culture for much of the 1940s and 1950s. In part, Mintz suggests, this was because “victory over the enemy, embraced as a final and all-encompassing notion, left no room for a tragedy that is unremitting” (5). American Jews chose to focus on “the enterprise of entering American society and seizing the opportunities offered to them to be available to the subversive sadness provoked by the Holocaust” (7). The historico-biblical epics discussed in this chapter—emerging during the time that Novick has called the years of transition, when a slight loosening of Cold War conflicts allowed for more open discussion of the Holocaust—force a confrontation with the very real consequences of humanity’s capacity for cruelty, self-destruction, and annihilation (127). No longer hovering in the background or simmering beneath the surface, the horror of the past emerges to trouble the dominant message of triumphant heroism.<sup>8</sup>

#### Conclusion: The Conflicted Hero of the Atomic Age Epic

As I have argued, the atomic age epic sits at a confluence of competing ways of making sense of the threat of extinction: existentialist pessimism, the Christian apocalyptic tradition, the angst of living in historical time, and the imminence/immanence of an ultimate ending. The epic brings these competing discourses into contact with its own complicated cultural legacy. Though of course the epic film has deep affinities with its literary predecessors in the world of antiquity, it also draws upon the tradition of the historical novel. To conclude, then, I would like to briefly consider the ways in which the postwar historico-biblical epic draws upon earlier literary models of heroism to confront the challenges of its present through its deeply conflicted and contradictory heroes.



Georg Lukács, in *The Historical Novel*, distinguishes between two types of hero. The hero of the ancient world epic is a “bearer of his destiny” which “connects him by indissoluble threads to the community whose fate is crystallized in his own” (67). As a result, he has the power to change the course of history. The mediocre hero, on the other hand, is far more limited in his agency, a middle-of-the-road sort, an individual who can be an observer of history rather than a maker of it (32-36). Certainly, Judah Ben-Hur fits into the latter model, a man who stumbles into the path of history and consequently is the conduit through which its struggles are articulated. The same, somewhat counterintuitively, might be said of the Jesus of *King of Kings*, who seems to get caught up in flow of contemporary historical events. However, in an era in which the power of the individual had become endlessly circumscribed by the ineffable forces of the atomic age, even the larger-than-life figures of Moses and Spartacus, who seem cut from the same mold as ancient world antecedents, become the vessel through which the divine will (or history) manifests rather than the masters of their own destinies. As such, the atomic age epic hero, like the genre of which he is such a central part, draws upon a layered literary history to confront the crushing realities of the postwar world and, in so doing, renders visible the terrors of acting within historical time.

The hope for a future, coupled with a recognition that no future might be possible in the face of atomic destruction, generates a pressure to which the epic responds with the irresolvable tension between the ability to change the historical world and the displacement of that ability onto some other power greater than the individual self. Each of the films discussed in this chapter attempts to sublimate and contain the terror of living in the midst of historical time. However, the “future perfect” strategy they utilize ensures that the better world promised by the films’ narratives remains infinitely deferred, and these films cannot actually represent the

fruition of these utopian dreams. The atomic age epic hero, a product of the profoundly anxious culture that produced him, cannot resolve the contradictions in which he remains mired.

In the following chapter, I turn to a similarly contested space in the historic-biblical epic, between the escape from the oppression of history represented by the Crucifixion and the unredeemed world in which the epic hero remains enmeshed. Through the new film technology of widescreen, films such as *The Robe* conjoin an escape from the boundedness of secular, embodied time with a corporeal experience of the ancient world. In doing so, the epic exposes the contradictory experience of living in the stream of historical time.

## Chapter 2—The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak: Embodiment, Transcendence, and Widescreen Historical Spectatorship

“The desire to *be* elsewhere without actually *going* elsewhere,” the visual theorist Alison Griffiths remarks, “seems to be hardwired into the human psyche” (286). As discussed in the first chapter, antiquity proved a particularly privileged site through which American culture attempted to work out, at the level of narrative, the question of endings and the irresolvable tension between agency and subordination before the seeming inevitability of the end of human history. The historico-biblical epic, particularly as it took shape in the widescreen era of the 1950s and 1960s, also utilized spectacle, affect, and immersion to work through the temporal questions and dilemmas facing atomic age America. The reintroduction of widescreen into Hollywood filmmaking—inaugurated in 1953 with the release of Fox’s film *The Robe*—reshaped the ways in which spectators were encouraged to relate to the film image, engendering different means of escaping into the world of the past and away from the imminence/immanence of atomic destruction. Rather than observing a world that remained unaware of their existence, audiences were now invited to become a part of the spectacle unfolding both before and around them. Widescreen seemed to promise the ability to transgress, if just temporarily, temporal boundaries, to encounter the redemptive moment when Christ walked the earth and ultimately broke into history and also escaped from it through the Crucifixion and his Resurrection.

*The Robe*, as well as its official sequel *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) and the similarly-themed *Barabbas* (1961), stage at both the narrative and technological levels the embodied appeals that were key to the way in which the historico-biblical epic encouraged spectators to understand their place in history. Drawing on mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian

theological explorations of time, industrial and trade discussions of widescreen technologies and exhibition formats, as well as work on time and affect in film theory, I argue that the widescreen epic provides an experience of two competing notions of temporality. On the one hand, Christ ruptures the flow of history, his Crucifixion the moment when time itself, as Christian theologians argued, comes to its fruition, and CinemaScope promised that one could be *there* (and *then*) and, along with the early Christian converts, physically witness the seeming fulfillment and transcendence of history. On the other, this sense of embodied immersion exists in tension with the teleological thrust of film narrative, which moves the characters and the spectator away from the transcendent moment of the Crucifixion, creating a deeply conflicted experience of time and forcing an acknowledgment of the embodied limits of temporal transgression.

I begin the chapter with a discussion of widescreen and the industrial and social shifts that influenced the changes in Hollywood filmmaking, showing how the desire for a more active mode of recreation encouraged the studios to offer their audiences increasingly immersive, “participatory” means of engaging with the film image. I also demonstrate the deep roots such technologies had within American culture. I then move into a discussion of how the widescreen historico-biblical epic’s emphasis on both bodily immersion and bodily pleasure speaks to and engages with questions raised by film theory, and I show how the theoretical work of scholars such as Linda Williams and Vivian Sobchack allows for a more nuanced understanding of the strategies by which the epic seeks to contend with the terrors of 20<sup>th</sup> Century history. Through a discussion of the three films, I show how their embodied appeals impact potential spectators, providing an experience of the Crucifixion that is simultaneously intensely visceral and spiritually transcendent.

## Postwar American Culture and the Quest for More Active, Immersive Recreation

While American culture as a whole struggled to imagine a viable future, the Hollywood studios also contended with a profound uncertainty about the financial solvency of their business. Though theater attendance had continued to grow throughout the immediate postwar years, rising to as much as 90 million per week in the years between 1945 and 1948, it quickly declined, falling to 60 million per week in 1950 and decreasing throughout the decade until it reached 40 million in 1960 (Steinberg 376). In addition to this significant and steady decline in theater attendance, the studios also had to contend with the Paramount Decision, a landmark Supreme Court case that decreed that the studios could no longer own their own theater chains, thus putting pressure on the studios to produce fewer (and usually more expensive) films in order to solidify their chances of making a profit. While this did not necessarily lead to the widescreen revolution, it did necessitate Hollywood investing substantially more financial resources into fewer and larger productions.

As film historian John Belton has shown, a variety of industrial, demographic, and societal changes contributed to this downward spiral in theater attendance. Television now provided some of the same pleasures and viewing experiences that had been associated with the cinema, thus reducing the incentive to leave the space of the home. Given this economic pressure, studios knew they had to provide a viewing experience that would draw the consuming public away from the box in their living rooms and to the downtown theater; the big-budget spectacle, whether in the form of a musical or an epic, provided the perfect vehicle for showcasing Hollywood's prowess. Whereas television connoted passive, black-and-white entertainment with a simple sound design, Hollywood could offer, in the words of Cole Porter,

“glorious Technicolor, breathtaking CinemaScope, and stereophonic sound” (Belton “Glorious Technicolor” 187).

At a broader societal level, the changing face of American recreation also placed a great deal of pressure on the studios, who could no longer assume that their urban audiences would flock to see the product being shown at their local theater. A spending boom after the war encouraged Americans to spend money on a variety of products and activities. For example, a dramatic increase in automobile ownership led to many driving longer distances for work and for vacation, which dovetailed with the exponential growth of the suburbs and the consequent abandonment of the inner cities, where many of the first-run theaters were located. Along with these new homes came an increase in the number of house-related recreational activities, including barbequing and home repair, all of which ate into the time that the public had once spent attending the cinema (Belton *Widescreen* 71-74). The American public was quickly becoming more diverse in its leisure pursuits.

The growth of these activities across the nation revealed an increased desire for more active and engaging recreational activities among the burgeoning middle class. In 1955, *Fortune* noted that “the sharpest fact about the postwar leisure market is the growing preference for *active* fun rather than mere onlooking” (“30 Billion for Fun” 54). In addition to the recreational activities mentioned above, American society witnessed a growth in outdoor sports such as golf and tennis. The post-war middle class was no longer satisfied with the previous means of being entertained, and the growth in such sports, all of which were time-consuming, indicating the extent to which the post-war spectator theorized by Belton and others was thoroughly middle-class, with both disposable income and leisure time (Belton *Widescreen* 77-78).

The growing thirst for more active means of participating in leisure activities also resulted, as David Eldridge has shown, in the substantial growth of such historical sites as Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village, both of which saw record attendance and began a period of expansion. In 1954, for example, almost 48 million people visited various historical sites throughout the United States, and places such as Greenfield and Williamsburg (both of which were opened in the 1930s), saw dramatic expansion during this period. Attendance at Williamsburg increased almost twofold between 1946 and 1956 (Eldridge 67). These sites were understood to offer a particular type of *historical experience*, one that allowed visitors to believe, if only for a brief time, that they were living in the world of the past, to offer, in Mike Goode's words, a sense of both spatial *and* temporal immersion (231). This was accomplished in large part through a combination of architectural structures and the fact that re-enactors behaved as if they were actually living in the period they sought to depict. Those who visited these sites found themselves surrounded by the sights, smells, and vision of the past, their bodies literally immersed in a simulacrum a bygone era of American history.

In a bit of a feedback loop, however, the directors of Williamsburg gradually realized that, as Goode points out, they needed something that would grant their site a greater sense of narrative cohesion. The vehicle for this effort turned out to be a film, entitled *Williamsburg: The Story of a Patriot*, which the directors believed would provide an experience of the past that would, in the director John Goodbody's words, "involve the participant so emotionally with the scene before his [sic] eyes that he literally lives in the eighteenth century [...] We want them to believe they are participating in the film action insofar as possible, rather than sitting placidly in the twentieth century watching a costume drama unfold through a rectangular window" (qtd.in Goode 235-236). As would become the case with a great deal of Hollywood industrial discourse

regarding Cinerama, CinemaScope, and the widescreen processes that followed, the rhetoric here emphasizes the sense of immediacy that this new format was seen to provide to viewers, as made evident by the stress on the literalness with which that escape is framed. Further, Goodbody underscores the ability of these new types of film technology to offer participation, as opposed to the passive viewing encouraged by the “rectangular window,” itself a reference to the previous Academy ratio.

The experience that Williamsburg—and other sites, such as Disneyland, which opened in 1955—sought to provide its visitors was one that emphasized access to a pivotal moment in the development of the American republic, and Michael Kammen argues that these types of sites also served as shrines of national belonging (547). As Goode demonstrates, however, the attempts to provide an unmediated access to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were doomed to always remain incomplete, the need for a coherent and governing narrative always in tension with the free form and sense of immersion offered by the rest of the town. The result was an uncomfortable fit between these two competing experiences, between an explanation of the past and an unmediated experience of it. A similar paradox would come to characterize the historico-biblical epic, which attempts to provide an immediate experience of the ancient world even as it must contend with the order and meaning imposed by narrative. It is precisely through the irresolvable tension between mediation and transparency that a widescreen epic film such as *The Robe* exposes the contradictory experience of witnessing the Crucifixion, when history is fulfilled yet continues its inexorable forward march into an uncertain future.

This emphasis on and desire for an immersive experience had deep roots in the American imagination, as the popularity of the panorama in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century demonstrates. The panorama represented, as Oliver Grau notes:



The greatest power of humans over the image in their day [...] but they were left entirely alone and powerless in their confrontation with the suggestive force of this enveloping, potential *totality* of the image [...] The picture and the three-dimensional scenery are focused on and adjusted to the observer with the precision of illusionism and, as it also addresses the human subjects on a physiological level, they find themselves both physically and emotionally *in the picture*. (107)

Furthermore, as Tom Gunning has argued, the panorama did more than represent a different space; it “functioned as an environmental [...] form.” In other words, the panorama sought to erase the distance between the spectator and that which was represented, inviting a feeling of total, unmediated reality.

The panorama’s focus on immersion intersected with other important American cultural obsessions of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, including an interest in the historical past and an investment in natural, beautiful spaces. A key aspect of the sensation—and the pleasure—of the visit to the historical panorama entailed witnessing the past as if one were present, forging a strong connection between reenactment and immersion. At the same time, the numerous panoramas depicting famous battles, including Gettysburg, endowed this present-tense feeling with a measure of unease, since such hyper-real sequences immersed the viewer in the midst of the carnage of battle. Panoramas depicting natural scenes, on the other hand, sought to provide their spectators an experience (often didactic) of the natural monuments of the nation (Griffiths 42-76). Panoramas thus “immersed one in a parallel universe where the burdens of the everyday were temporarily lifted,” and they sought to engender multiple feelings in those who visited them, including “respite from the rush of modernity,” “momentary sovereignty,” and “vicarious identification with the players of history and a privileged vantage point on some of nature’s most

prized beauty” (Griffiths 76-77). These multiplicitous (and often competing) appeals of the panorama would also come to characterize widescreen epic films as well, particularly those that took history as their subject.

The popularity of the panorama in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century also intersected with the increasing presence of Protestantism in American public life. The art historian John Davis argues that the religious panorama encouraged an experience of the panoptic sublime which, though it promised power over space, “also came with a measure of discomfort, a sense of self-loss in the face of spatial infinitude and the corresponding desire to confront that loss” (61).<sup>1</sup> This “popular version of the sublime,” David Morgan writes, “rivalled, even surpassed, words, making access to the events portrayed in biblical text immediate and riveting” (164). For 19<sup>th</sup> Century Protestants, the panorama had the power to bring the sacred past to life, to seemingly leave behind the taint of its artificiality; vision had joined hearing as a privileged means through which to encounter biblical truth.

Exemplary in this regard is *The Cyclorama of Jerusalem*, which sought to immerse its 19<sup>th</sup> Century viewers in the Palestine of the day of Christ’s Crucifixion. Eyewitness reviews of the *Cyclorama* reveal the extent to which it was understood to offer the spectator the ability to *feel* as if they were physically present at this pivotal historical and religious moment. The brochure informed viewers that they would experience a powerful illusion of depth that would recreate a specific moment in time, and Alison Griffiths has suggested that technologies like the religious cyclorama sought to provide a feeling of temporal simultaneity. She argues that these technologies provide, in their ideal form, a sort of “peak experience,” an encounter that involves a certain loss of self and a transgression of time (32-33). Further, because of the feeling of co-presence (and of witnessing) engendered by the panoramic view, one is brought into a “closer

communion with a Christian God.” At the same time, Griffiths writes, the Crucifixion, and its representation in art, also evokes the specter of death, particularly through the sight of the anguished body of Christ on the cross, “the tragic highlight of the Passion” (Griffiths 35).

As I shall demonstrate in my discussion below, the presence of death—and the attempt to contend with its implacability—also emerges as a key tension in the widescreen epic. Unlike the panorama, which frequently embalmed time so that it remained frozen into an uncanny stability, its cinematic successors would conjoin the immersive, embodied encounter of the past with the forward-moving thrust of cinematic narrative. Because films such as *The Robe*, like their panorama predecessors, invite spectators to *witness* Christ’s crucifixion and yet also move them away from that moment, they engender the conflicted experience of living in the midst of historical time. The death that, in the atomic age, became an ever-present fact of life, saturates the subconscious of even the most spiritually triumphant of epics.

#### Immersion and Participation Come to the Cinema

Given the increased thirst for physically immersive and engaged recreation that came to characterize much of American society, it should come as no surprise that the cinema would begin to take note and seek to draw back this wandering audience. The deployment of widescreen as a possible solution did not begin within Hollywood, however. Instead, it was the advent of Cinerama, which developed outside of the studio structure, which brought home how great had grown the public desire for cinematic entertainment that offered an opportunity to experience a sense of participation rather than passive observation. The advertising that accompanied this new exhibition technology continually emphasized its immersive qualities, suggesting that it was Cinerama, and only Cinerama, that “surrounds *you*, the viewer, with

movement, color, and sound so realistic—with such dynamic impact—that *you* become a part of every brilliant sequence” (emphasis in original). In the same example, the ad superimposes the body of a presumed spectator onto the spectacle of the rollercoaster, showing that Cinerama *as a technology* could provide the same sense of (possibly both exciting *and* terrifying) exhilaration as the actual experience of being on a rollercoaster or going over a waterfall (*figure 7*).

**CINERAMA . . .**  
**One full year on Broadway, still**  
**smashing box office records!**

Yes, Cinerama—the film medium that ushered in a new era of entertainment—celebrates its first Broadway birthday—and box office has never been better!

In just one year of public showings Cinerama has been eagerly accepted by an overwhelmed public. It is acclaimed as the most dramatic addition to motion picture entertainment in 25 years! The silent “flickers” provided action, the “Jazz Singer” introduced sound, and Technicolor showed the subject in natural color. But it is Cinerama, and only Cinerama, which surrounds *you*, the viewer, with movement, color and sound so realistic—with such dynamic impact—that *you* become a part of every brilliant sequence.

Since its first showing, Cinerama has become one of the world’s outstanding theatrical attractions. It has *yet* to be equalled. It can *never* be excelled. There is only one Cinerama! The whole country knows it! Box office receipts prove it!

<b>NEW YORK</b> . . . Warner Theatre 52nd Week 2 million patrons	<b>CHICAGO</b> . . . Palace Theatre 9th Week
<b>DETROIT</b> . . . Music-Hall Theatre 29th Week	<b>LOS ANGELES</b> . . . Hollywood Theatre 22nd Week
<b>PHILADELPHIA</b> . . . Boyd Theatre. Opening October 5th—largest advance sale for this city.	<b>WASHINGTON, D. C.</b> . . . Warner Theatre Opening day—November 5th

There is only one  
**CINERAMA**

PRINT BY TECHNICOLOUR • A LOWELL THOMAS AND MERIAN C. COOPER PRESENTATION

Figure 7. Cinerama advertisement emphasizing the embodied, exciting pleasures of the format.

This ad and others like it both emphasized Cinerama’s ability to replicate the full range of human (especially peripheral) vision and appealed to the rest of the human sensorium. The entire body was understood to be caught up in the cinema of sensations on offer, and the appeal to the body played a part in determining what types of films were made. In the case of Cinerama, these tended to focus on travel (Rogers 28-32). Embedded within the advertising rhetoric was a belief

that the newly enhanced medium of film could provide filmgoers access to other physical spaces and experiences that they might not be able to afford or encounter with their actual bodies. The exhibition of the technology, as Belton suggests, became a special event in and of itself, further evidence of the dovetailing of the cinema and the broader culture of active recreation (Belton *Widescreen* 95-99).

In addition to its somatic appeals, Cinerama also contained and cultivated certain ideas about the mastery of space and the transgressing of time. *This is Cinerama* emphasized landscapes and panoramas, suggesting that the viewer could encounter these far-off places and, just as importantly, indulge in a form of imperialist and patriotic fantasy. American ingenuity and technological prowess, these films suggested, not only enabled this magnificent new film technology, but also allowed the spectator to feel as if they, too, could control space and time. This became even clearer in the film *Cinerama Holiday*, which featured an American couple encountering the wonders of Europe—as well as a European couple encountering the U.S.—with the technology again serving as a means by which American spectators could view themselves as in command of, and yet also subject to, the new cinematic technology of Cinerama (Belton, *Widescreen* 89-91).

Some critics expressed ambivalence about the overwhelming nature of the visual spectacle presented by this new process. Bosley Crowther, in typical fashion, announced that “this concentration of assault upon the eardrums, added to the saturation of the eye, inevitably produces sensations that are rousing, intoxicating—and unique” (X1), his words suggesting that the new format provided physical stimulation that could be overwhelming to a spectator used to the standard way of projecting and experiencing films. Nevertheless, the first Cinerama film was an enormous box office success, making well over \$32 million (Belton *Widescreen* 99).

Faced with this sign of public favor, the studios were determined to maximize their profits by offering similar pleasures to their spectators, though in this case they would utilize a more limited—and ultimately more flexible—set of widescreen methods. Fox studio head Daryl Zanuck, always one to pick up on the trends that shaped the movie-going public's tastes, saw the potential in the development of this new exhibition technology. Writing to Jack Warner of Warner Bros., he suggested that, “from the standpoint of ‘audience participation’ alone it is like looking at the first talkie and trying to compare the sound with what we have in pictures today [...] for lasting effect we have to have a medium that makes it easier for us to *bring the audience into the realm of the drama*” (Behlmer 233 emphasis mine). Zanuck's words reveal his awareness of a sense that widescreen enabled or encouraged a blurring of temporal and spatial dimensions, so that the spectator, rather than passively consuming the image before them, could feel as if they were actually in the *where* and the *when* of what was taking place on screen. Just as sound had (Zanuck suggests) changed the nature of filmmaking, so widescreen promised another great leap forward. In Hollywood, it would take the shape of the steeply-curved screen that became synonymous, at least in its early years, with Fox's adaptation of widescreen for narrative filmmaking: CinemaScope.

#### A Changing Dynamic Between Screen and Subject

As Zanuck sensed, the changing shape and dimension of the screen was also understood to have significant consequences for how the spectator was expected to relate to the new, larger, more immersive image. Now, rather than being positioned as passive, the spectator was instead encouraged to become a part of the spectacle, invited, in other words, to adopt a more active mode of viewing. The earlier, Academy-ratio sized film screen, it was suggested, had

encouraged a sense of distance between spectator and drama (recall, for example, Williamsburg's Goodbody, who dismissed the costume drama seen through a rectangular window). As film theorist and critic Andre Bazin would put it, "alone, hidden in a dark room, we watch through half-open blinds a spectacle that is unaware of our existence" (102). Note in Bazin's formulation, premised on Academy-ratio filmmaking, the centrality of separation between viewer and object and the invitation to experience a feeling of voyeurism, a sense that one is illicitly gazing at those who do not know they are being watched. The pleasure in this scenario derives from the power relation thus established, between the empowered voyeur and the passive object(s) of the gaze.

Widescreen, on the other hand, sought to change all of this. "Gone is the viewer's sense of eavesdropping on activities that are, after all, going on in another room," an article in *Time* noted, with clear echoes of both Bazin and Goodbody. "In CinemaScope," the article continues, "the illusion of the other room outflanks the beholder in his theater seat and overwhelms him [sic] with a frontal attack of enormous images and sounds" ("Cinema" n.p.n.) *Time*'s description of the way in which the new format affected viewers is remarkable in part because it emphasizes the shift from that sense of voyeurism to a sense of being overwhelmed by the image. The language of the passage frames the experience of CinemaScope as an especially violent and perhaps even terrifying encounter, as evident from the highly militaristic language with which it describes that experience, including "outflanks the beholder," "overwhelms," and "frontal attack." The new cinematic technologies might have offered spectators excitement and thrills, but they were also understood to pose significant dangers and possible threats to the human sensorium.

Part of this had to do with the changes implemented in theater architecture necessitated by the largeness of the CinemaScope screen. Whereas the movie palaces of the prewar period had often emphasized a cinema of distraction with their lavish architecture (as Sigfried Kracauer termed it), the new screens were often situated in front of the proscenium, so that the audience was invited to focus on the immersive effect of the screen rather than on the surrounding space and its accoutrements. Postwar audiences were thus confronted with an “eye-filling, wall-to-wall display of image and sound, in which screens blended into the side walls of the theater auditorium and the film was experienced directly, as it were, unmediated by theater architecture” (Belton *Widescreen* 196).<sup>2</sup> The desire for escapism from the pressures of reality was still present, but the terms in which it was addressed had shifted from architecture to exhibition technology.

While one strand of widescreen discourse emphasized the ability of the screen to overwhelm viewers with the vastness of the image, the other stressed the power of the technology to provide a sense of *presence* and a concomitant sense of *being present*. Indeed, Zanuck pointed out that the new format of CinemaScope provided the “intimacy of a play” (156), while Earl Sponable argued that “it is the purpose of CinemaScope to give the performance the greatest possible intimacy, the quality of ‘presence’ in place of the remoteness characteristic of traditional movies; and to exploit fully those scenes and subjects in which an audience can enjoy a sense of participation” (192). CinemaScope was framed as providing a similar set of pleasures to those offered by the traditional theater, so that the spectator was invited to feel a sense of *physical* intimacy with the characters on the screen.

Embedded in and intertwined with this emphasis on presence was also the suggestion that this new technology enabled spectators to actually *participate* in the action taking place. Drawing attention to the lack of the proscenium in the exhibition of a widescreen film, Leon



Shamroy, the cinematographer for *The Robe*, suggested that “with the lack of consciousness of a framework imprisoning the action you feel as if you were actually witnessing an event, rather than watching a picture of it.” He went on: “in ‘The Robe’ CinemaScope has achieved what the earliest Greek dramatists sought. It makes the audience part of the play. The huge curved screen gives the viewer a feeling of being surrounded by the action and, therefore, participating in it” (177-178). Here, I would like to point out the ambiguity embedded in Shamroy’s rhetoric, for while he suggests that the new format encourages a certain measure of passivity, he also suggests a certain measure of agency on the part of the spectator. The viewer is thus positioned as both active *and* passive, an intertwining that would have significant consequences for how the widescreen historico-biblical epic framed its understanding of historical and religious experience.

The scholar Charles Barr argues that widescreen generated a more active mode of spectating in part by encouraging the spectator to choose those elements that are most narratively significant, or by being forced to actually turn the head in order to follow the action from one end of the screen to the other. In his discussion of Otto Preminger’s 1954 *River of No Return*, Barr argues that the wide range of objects made visually available by widescreen composition allows for a wide range of images to be put on display. Thus, in the famous scene in which Marilyn Monroe’s suitcase is carried over cascading rapids, the fact that it remains in focus encourages the spectator to process this information and to determine its narrative significance (or lack thereof), thus allowing them to take on the interpretive functions typically conveyed through editing (10).

Another key part of the invitation to participate stemmed from the forms of bodily empathy the new technologies produced between the body of the spectator and the body on the

screen. While most films utilizing Cinerama emphasized the pleasures of wide vistas and the sheer spectacle enabled by the new technology, and while at first Zanuck stressed that Fox would primarily produce films in CinemaScope that could make the most use of the greater sense of scale it enabled—in other words films that accentuated spectacle and panoramic vistas—the latter was soon utilized even in melodramas and other genres that focused on the relationships between and among individuals.<sup>3</sup> These films included such sex comedies as *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), as well as such taut and emotional melodramas as Elia Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955).<sup>4</sup> The use of the format in these genres frequently emphasized an appeal to the senses, while also generating a measure of physical and embodied empathy between the bodies on screen and those sitting in the audience. As Ariel Rogers shows in her discussion of *East of Eden*, Kazan utilizes the expanded CinemaScope screen not only to emphasize James Dean's strikingly embodied method acting performance, but also to draw in the audience and to encourage the use of the body to understand what is taking place on screen. As she puts it, "CinemaScope's bodily address could affect the experience of narrative as well, increasing the viewer's experience of empathy—allowing him or her to feel *with* rather than simply *for* the situation and people depicted onscreen" (74).

Films produced in CinemaScope and its successor widescreen processes utilized the new dimensions to push the body in new directions, and the close-up in particular came to represent the monstrous possibilities of these technologies. In a film such as Nicholas Ray's *Bigger than Life*, for example, the cortisone addiction of the main character leads to his increasing megalomaniacal behavior, a pathologically inflated sense of his own importance that is reflected in the expanded, grotesque way in which his face appears in widescreen close-up. A film like *Rebel Without a Cause*, on the other hand, utilizes the widescreen frame to heighten the sense of

imprisonment the characters feel, likewise inviting the spectator to experience a similar sense of claustrophobia (Rogers 82-83). As we shall see, the historico-biblical epics discussed in this chapter would engender a similarly unsettling pleasurable combination of responses. While they would largely use widescreen to immerse spectators in the midst of significant moments of history, they would also encourage a feeling of embodied sympathy with their religious convert heroes, and this thoroughly embodied experience of the ancient world would prove as unsettling as it was pleasurable.

Indeed, reviews for early widescreen films suggested that the appeals to the body that widescreen technologies utilized could provoke anxiety, and Ariel Rogers argues that widescreen's appeal to the body proved to be something of a double-edged sword (at least for some). Critics suggested that the overpowering, immersive nature of the image was not only stifling (in some cases), but could also take over the bodily controls of the spectators. Several of the reviews for *How to Marry a Millionaire*, for example, commented upon the almost physically smothering nature of the image of Marilyn Monroe. The reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* compared her CinemaScoped body to being "smothered in baked Alaska" (Guernsey n.p.n.) There was something almost grotesque about both the appearance of the body and the way in which the image itself seemed to take on the contours and the physical reality of the represented (Rogers 31-60).

While many critics of the period expressed ambivalence about the ways in which CinemaScope both put the body on display and appealed to the body of the spectator, others saw in the new format the full realization of the potential of cinema. Roland Barthes, writing in 1954 (the year after CinemaScope's introduction), seemed to have a more sanguine view of the ways in which the format could transform not just the relationship between the filmgoer and the

cinematic image, but the spectator and the history such films often represented. Barthes suggested that CinemaScope blurred the boundary between the spectator and the image, writing, “I lean into the very breadth of the spectacle and, emerging from a larval state, become a bit godlike; for I am no longer beneath the image but before it, in the midst of it [...]” (116). Here, Barthes highlights the extent to which the body of the spectator comes to mirror not necessarily that of the action on the screen, but the *actual format itself*. It is also striking that he suggests that CinemaScope renders the formerly passive *spectator* into, in his words, one that is “a bit godlike,” granted a new form of agency by this new direction of the medium.

Barthes develops this idea even further, emphasizing the particular consequences CinemaScope had for the representation of history and how the spectator experiences the past. The process, he argues, will establish or require a new relationship between man and the imaged world, so that a “new dialectic must surface, between humans and the horizon, between humans and objects, should come into view, a dialectic of solidarity and no longer one of décor. This space, properly speaking, should be the space of History; and technically speaking, the epic dimension is born” (116). Note the use of the word “solidarity,” so that there is a newly-established symbiosis between unfolding action and the person sitting in the audience. Further, he also argues that the newly widened screen may in fact bring to fruition the possibilities always inherent in the epic form, giving new life to the genre. Instead of merely bearing witness to the unfolding of events, Barthes argues that now one can inhabit the same space as the characters. Imagining what it would be like to see Eisenstein’s famous epic film *Battleship Potemkin* in CinemaScope, he suggests that the spectator will now be “pressed up against the very air, the stone, the crowd: this ideal *Potemkin*, where your hand can finally reach out to the insurgents, where you can share in the light and receive the blow of the tragic Odessa Steps right to your

chest as it were” (117). For Barthes, the new format almost becomes a new medium, appealing not just to the vision of the spectator, but also to the various other senses that she brings to bear when she watches a film. The space of the diegesis, the body of the characters, and the body of the spectator have now become united as one.

### Theorizing the Body and the Screen

With its specifically embodied appeals, widescreen cinema served as more than just a means of thrilling audiences with sensory pleasures. Indeed, the format raised important questions about the nature of spectatorship, affect, and form, questions which have recently emerged within film theory. Eugenie Brinkema, for example, in her polemical *The Forms of the Affects*, calls for a radical rethinking of the relationship between cinematic form and affect. Rather than seeing these two entities as mutually exclusive terms, thus reifying problematic and ultimately self-defeating tendencies in film theory, she emphasizes the necessity of formal analysis as a means of concretizing affect *within form itself* (xv-xvi). She demonstrates how it is that encounters with specific affects (she focuses on grief, disgust, anxiety, and joy), stem as much from the form that they take in film as they do from the bodies of those sitting in the audience. As I will demonstrate, it is precisely through its form—the steeply curved screen that envelops the audience, the almost smothering physical intimacy between characters and spectators—that widescreen epic film engages with the affect produced by the Crucifixion and its importance for time and history.

The relationship between form and affect has also been taken up, though in a slightly different form, by Linda Williams, who suggests that the body serves an important cultural function within particular genres. Three genres, she argues, draw attention to the excesses of

bodily expression: horror draws attention to the body in agony; pornography to the body caught up in pleasure; and the melodrama to the body caught up in excesses of emotion. These “low,” “gross” genres, she argues, rely upon the temporal experience they force the viewer to encounter, whether that be the on-time of sexual coupling that produces orgasm, the too-soon encounter with the monster or the killer that ends in the death of the victim, or the too-late that engenders the tears of grief or pathos. In each case, the body of the spectator is invited to mimic the types of bodily feeling that appear on the screen (10-12).

While Williams remains invested in questions raised by the psychoanalytic tradition within film theory, her primary relevance for my purposes is her attempt to take seriously the cultural function of bodily excess within certain genres and for her proposition that such bodies attempt to work through questions raised by a relationship with time. While she does not include the epic in her list of “body genres,” I would suggest that it is also a genre marked by bodily excesses, and that the narratives of each of these films go out of their way to subject the male body to excesses of emotion and bodies “beside themselves” in the heights of various emotions and affects. What marks the genre as significant, however, is the extent to which it seeks, at different moments, to enact all three of the temporal modes that Williams discusses. For the historico-biblical epic, especially that which relied upon the embodied appeals of widescreen, it is simultaneously on time, too soon, and too late. It is on time in that the spectator is invited to bear witness to history’s fulfillment, to be on time in encountering the Crucifixion. At the same time, however, it is also too late, in that neither the characters in the drama nor the spectators can intervene to prevent what is about to transpire; it is an event that is both necessary and has also already transpired in the past. Finally, it remains too soon in that the characters must still face the power of Rome—which is itself the power of history in the as-yet-unredeemed physical world—

which often inflicts its horrific powers of bodily suffering onto the corporeal bodies of those left behind after the Crucifixion.

I would also go so far as to argue that the epic seeks to solve the problem of origins, particularly the origins provided by the Passion. For a culture that struggled to envision a human future, the Christian past represented a temporal site through which to experience multiple competing notions of time and the place of the individual within them. The widescreen epic, more than its pre-widescreen counterparts, encouraged a belief that the past could be accessed without mediation, that one could reunite with and experience the moment when Christ was crucified and thus both move backward in time and escape from the relentless forward movement of narrative, historical time. Like the purest melodrama, it promises that we can access a moment of origin, even as it also acknowledges that such an access always remains incomplete. It is perhaps no accident that the widescreen era saw the resurgence of films set during the actual life (and death) of Christ, a temporal setting that had not been seen in Hollywood filmmaking since the silent era.

While the genres that Williams discusses are marked by their reliance upon the aural and visual excesses of the *female body*, the epic is one of the genres that seems to delight in conspicuously displaying the male one. Williams' argument that the female body/spectator is both the moved and the moving is particularly relevant here, as the act of religious conversion—which frequently serves as the narrative center of the films discussed in this chapter—necessarily involves the physical expression of emotion that seems to blend both ecstasy and tears. However, as I shall discuss in each of the widescreen epics below, it is the body of the male convert that is frequently caught up in these grand gestures and expressions of feeling. The face in particular comes to occupy a particularly privileged position in the widescreen epic, as it becomes the

marker for the spectator of the *encounter with* the divine presence of the off-screen Christ. The rest of the body, furthermore, becomes problematic for the male hero seeking to escape from the corporeal world, as it threatens to weigh him down and render him susceptible to the tortures of the Roman state or the temptations of the flesh.

This theorization of the relationship between the spectatorial body and the body on-screen also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the specifically historical pleasures offered by the epic. As Vivian Sobchack suggests, the Hollywood epic demands that the spectator engage in a bodily reckoning with historical temporality. Building from her point that “History begins first not in our reflective existence as historical objects but in our reflexive existence as *embodied subjects*,” Sobchack goes on to argue: “it is as carnal as well as cultural beings that we presently sit in a movie theater to see a representation of past events and somehow get caught up in a comprehension of time—not only the temporal movement of the movie and its narrative but also a prereflective and imaginative field in which to sense ourselves as temporal beings who transcend our present presence” (37). What many see as the genre’s signature failings *as* history—the excesses, the obviousness, the self-congratulatory rhetoric—Sobchack argues are instead key to the way in which it forces an acknowledgment of one’s lived body presence as a historical subject. The genre does not necessarily encourage the spectator to think critically or with distance about the events of the past, but instead to encounter and experience them in their immediacy *through* and *on* the body. The epic holds out the possibility of transcending the limits of the present, even as the spectator is “made more presently aware than is usual of his or her bodily presence,” “‘condemned’ to the present and physically ‘tested’ by the length of the film’s duration” (37).



This bodily encounter with time exists in tension with the escape from the terror of history that Christ and the religious experience supposedly offer. As Ruiz potently reminds us, one of the most powerful functions of religion as a set of social rituals and functions is to ameliorate, to move us beyond, an awareness of time and the inexorable march of history. “Religion or religious experiences,” he writes, “[...] means essentially the way in which one (or the many) places oneself in the hands of god (or the gods). Religion posits the terrors besetting one’s own personal life and the weight of collective history as part of a divine plan and as the sum total of inscrutable but always wise actions of an all-powerful, all-knowing deity (or deities)” (17). Religion thus provides the means through which one can gain access to or experience a unity with a powerful deity that exists beyond the confines of the material world, in the process denying one’s own body in order to access that higher power. While the widescreen historico-biblical epic clearly wants to provide a similar experience to its spectators, its continued emphasis on embodiment undercuts that attempt at escape.

Several of the films discussed in the previous chapter contended with a similar set of issues, in no small part due to the imposing physicality of stars such as Kirk Douglas and, of course, Charlton Heston. *Spartacus*, for example, struggled to overcome the simultaneously athletic and abjected physicality of the hero and elevate him into the realm of the symbolic. Likewise, both Moses and Ben-Hur are heroes whose hulking frames seem to mitigate against their role as spiritual guardians. Certainly, a great deal of this had to do with the bodily presence of Heston. R. Barton Palmer argues that:

The epic hero like Moses or Ben-Hur cannot contest the metaphysical forces under the influence of which his drama of suffering and vindication plays out.

Large as he is in these two roles, Heston finds himself at the mercy of (or subject

to deliverance by) forces so much larger than himself that they cannot even find onscreen representation at all: the disembodied God that speaks out of the rocky mountaintop in *The Ten Commandments*, the Christ who occupies the space just outside the frame in *Ben-Hur*—presences defined by their lack of presence, even as the epic hero is limited by the untranscendent obtrusiveness of his physicality, which fills the era's widened screen. (56)

The physicality of the epic hero always seems to weigh him down in the corporeal world, keeping him from ever escaping the toils of temporality in the way that Christ, for example, can. Even a hero like Moses, as we have seen, finds his own body subjected to the power of God and the imprint of the divine will on his body.

Reviews of *Ben-Hur* likewise pointed out that there was something about Heston—ranging from his acting style to the ways in which his body was utilized by the script—that kept him from ever attaining or conveying a sense of the spiritual or the transcendent. In many ways, Heston was just *too much* of a body. The fact that so many of the epics in which he appeared were shot in the various forms of widescreen that came to be almost synonymous with the genre of the epic exacerbated this trend, enlarging his already powerful body to even greater screen magnitude. Paul V. Beckley suggested in his review of *Ben-Hur*, that “Wyler’s version may strike some of us as excessive, concentrating on the physical horror to a point where it draws the mind away from the spiritual values and falls far short of any sublimity [...] in this sense Heston, for all his lip service to spiritual understanding, does not really seem any less material than Boyd’s Messala [...] The film is at its best in the purely masculine, strictly physical sequences” (n.p.n.). Beckley’s review indicates the extent to which at least some viewers of the time sensed the unsettled relationship between the body and the spirit, between the submission necessary to

render the hero amenable to conversion and the spirituality involved with that process. While the adrenaline-pumping chariot race and the terrifying nature of the slavery in the galleys of *Ben-Hur* may be thrilling to watch, they tend to undermine the more spiritual appeals of the narrative.

As this historical and theoretical context makes clear, widescreen was understood to mark a significant change in the way in which the medium of film worked on the spectator. This chapter adds to this discussion by showing how widescreen also transformed the way in which *history* was represented within the genre of the historico-biblical epic. At both the level of narrative and the level of technological experience, the genre struggles with the historical crisis evoked by the Crucifixion. As a variant of the historico-biblical epic that stages this pivotal event and its aftermath, each of these films contends with not only that central moment but also the ways in which the historical world of the film remains, at the material level, largely unchanged by the events that have just transpired. Unlike the Old Testament film, in which God's forceful presence often engenders a visualized shift in history—for example, God's appearance in *The Ten Commandments* results in the freeing of the Hebrews from Egypt—the New Testament-based epic must find a way of mitigating the terror of history's "flux" (as Babington and Evans phrase it) by emphasizing the paradoxical historical and transhistorical importance of the Crucifixion (179). The method for providing such an experience, however, triggers the embodied response that not only draws attention to an awareness of the bodies on display on screen, but also encourages an experience of embodied timeliness that is multiplicitous rather than simply transcendent.

### Searching for the Timeless in *The Robe*

*The Robe* brings many of these issues to the forefront. As the first film released in the newly-minted widescreen process of CinemaScope, it stages at both the narrative and technological level the embodied appeals and questions that I have been suggesting were such a pivotal part of the way in which the historico-biblical epic encouraged spectators to understand their place in time. During the course of the film, Christ seems to intercede in the flow of history, representing the moment when the process itself seems to come to its fruition. As such, the fact that the new format of CinemaScope promised the ability to experience history at the level of bodily presence seemed to offer the ability to experience the moment when pagan, secular history experienced its fulfillment. One could bear direct witness with the earliest faithful the seeming fulfillment of historical time. However, the sense of immersion promised by CinemaScope exists in tension with the forward momentum of historical time, which continues to move both the characters and the spectator toward the death that seemingly awaits those who follow in Christ's footsteps. The forces of history—personified here in the power of Rome—continue to circumscribe and undercut the ability of the genre to offer an escape from time's forward flow.

The film, based on the bestselling novel by Lloyd C. Douglas, follows the Roman soldier Marcellus Gallio (Richard Burton) as he is placed in charge of the garrison of Jerusalem under the service of Pontius Pilate. While there, he is placed in charge of the Crucifixion, and so he is present at the moment when Christ breathes his last. Driven slowly mad by his guilt over his complicity in Christ's death, Marcellus gradually comes to realize that he should put his faith in the newly-formed faith of Christianity. He is brought to this realization in part through his slave Demetrius (Victor Mature), who converts more quickly. Both, however, eventually run afoul of

the Emperor Caligula (Jay Robinson), and while Demetrius escapes, Marcellus, as well as his beloved Diana (Jean Simmons), are sentenced to death on the archery field. The film ends with the two of them marching off toward a presumed reunion with the off-screen Christ.

*The Robe* opens with a sequence designed to show off the ability of CinemaScope to capture the plenitude and excess of ancient Rome, while Marcellus' ironic voiceover (delivered in fine form by the Byronic Richard Burton) suggests that these markers of excess and Roman supremacy merely paper over the essential failings of the Roman Empire. The gods, he suggests, are only fictions that human beings create in order to convince themselves of their own importance and to stave off the inevitability of human decline and the pressures of history. The gods may have their physical manifestations in this world, but they are merely the external reflections of mankind's desires, seemingly devoid of actual substance. The gods' insubstantiality, and their base representation in the materials molded by human hands, will come to bear particular significance once Marcellus encounters the living, breathing body of Christ and even more so when he sees that body abjected and dying on the cross and has to contend with his own complicity in that death.

If the gods of the Romans can only find representation in objects created by human hands, the film's Christ has a more material, if still largely off-screen, presence. Indeed, one of the most striking things about *The Robe* is that, like the Christ in *Ben-Hur*, this film's savior is never actually shown in full close-up, instead hovering just at the edges of the frame. While he remains largely off-screen, however, this does not decrease his influence on the narrative, as his presence inspires an affective and embodied reaction in the characters with whom he comes into contact and, through them, inspires the spectator to experience that reaction as well. Since Christ does not actually appear in the frame, the film relies on showing the spectator the responses of

those who encounter him in the diegetic space, thus showcasing the very limits of the immersion that CinemaScope supposedly provides.

When, for example, Demetrius and Gallio first arrive in Jerusalem, they see Christ riding in the distance. The camera lingers on a medium shot of Demetrius as he gazes at the figure that the spectator can only see in long shot. In a conversation with a fellow slave, Demetrius seems perplexed about the man he has just seen, muttering that he does not know what it is about this figure that seems to draw him so forcefully, his gaze looking into a beyond that the film does not allow the spectator to see. Erica Sheen argues that “what occupies this cinematic ‘beyond’ is an unseen face, an unspoken dialogue and Demetrius’ doubled ‘I don’t know’ articulates the moment of conversion at which his face becomes the one to which he addresses himself hereafter,” an exchange of looks that ends up articulating a face-to-face relationship with God (304). It is Christ’s face that seems to draw Demetrius into the encounter with something beyond the realm of the physical, something that promises him an escape from the slavery in which he is enmeshed.

While the film allows Demetrius unimpeded access to the visage of this Messiah—and indeed the novel also emphasizes the specific appearance of Christ within this scene—the same cannot be said of the spectator. The only access the modern observer has of the divine presence is via the emotional and physical registers experienced by Demetrius, both of which are expressed on his countenance. As Sheila J. Nayar points out, “interaction through seeing [...] makes one’s encounter with the gods (or Christ’s suffering, or God’s power) *real* [...] these films, too, function on the basis of sensory output, for it is only through the aurally or visually witnessed and witnessable, as I mentioned earlier, that the word of God, or god’s love, can legitimately be *collective* as an enterprise” (82). This scene engages in a doubling, so that the

Greek's body comes to bear the burden of providing an encounter with God made flesh, reinforcing the divide between the ancient world and the modern even in the midst of seemingly providing the spectator access to the latter. The spectator is thus forced to acknowledge the fleshiness of Demetrius' physical body and the material world of which he is a part and also confronted with the limits of the immersion seemingly promised by CinemaScope.

Part of the emotional intensity of this scene stems from the nature of that countenance. As Babington and Evans remark in an extended discussion on Mature's star text, there is something almost *too* fleshy about Mature's body, his face conveying a certain "gigantism of emotion," which in turn transfers the grand themes of the epic onto the body of the hero. Further, they suggest that the flaws of his physique—less defined than that of other epic actors like Heston and Douglas—embody a certain tendency toward what they term "voluptuous enslavement." While this took the form of sexual debauchery with Mature's earlier epic hero Samson, this film puts his face to different use, showing how the impact of conversion registers as a form of emotional and physical *impression* on his body, so that his corporeal form becomes the means through which the contemporary spectator gains a measure of limited access to the redemptive power that Christ represents within the film's perspective. The body at this moment seems caught up beside itself in its communion with the divine, and while Babington and Evans suggest that the excessiveness of Mature encourages a sense of distance in the spectator, I would argue that it can also accomplish the opposite, encouraging an empathetic response, a bodily echo in the spectator who can also feel as if she is caught up in the affective current associated with conversion and the encounter with the divine person of Christ (229-237).

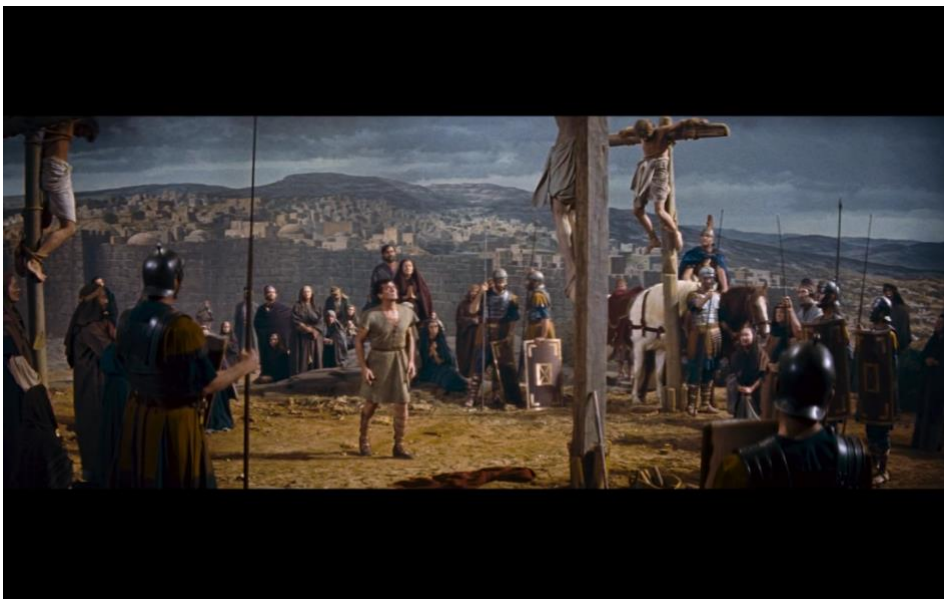
This emphasis on the affective power of immersion and conversion is brought even more to the surface when Demetrius sees Christ stumbling on his way to Calvary. The cinematography

of this scene emphasizes the sense of being part of the crowd, standing and witnessing as Christ staggers across the frame. Here, the sense of participation and presence endowed by widescreen generates a powerful mixture of the different affects associated with Williams' body genres.

While the film encourages a feeling of encompassing immersion, the narrative also consistently emphasizes the spectator's rootedness in their own historical moment, caught up in the mesh of historical/narrative progress that moves Christ inexorably along the path to his death and moves the spectator along with him. The scene encourages a feeling of complicity, of being caught up in the workings of history, and this in turn heightens the pathos and melodrama of this pivotal moment in the history of the faith. The viewer is witnessing both history's transcendence, while also being forced to recognize (acknowledge) its irrevocable momentum.

The scene that follows shows Demetrius gazing at the body of Christ in a tableau reminiscent of the staging of the Cyclorama of Jerusalem, and at a key moment the camera moves in for a close-up of Demetrius' face, and this change of camera distance brings into the forefront the affective impact of this pivotal moment (*figures 8, 9, and 10*). Carl Plantinga has eloquently shown how the sight of the face in film can provoke a form of emotional contagion, so that the film invites a sharing of feeling between spectator and character (*Moving Viewers* 125-128).<sup>5</sup> In his work on religion and film, S. Brent Plate similarly argues that the face in religious contexts can "transport viewers to a transcendent realm 'beyond,'" going on to say that "cinema, like religious iconography before it, turns the face into something other, something awe-inspiring and tinged with inaccessibility [...] performing magic on the on the sensual, rapt attention of those watching" (135-138).







*Figures 8, 9, and 10. The Robe offers both the pleasures of the vast panorama (similar to The Cyclorama of Jerusalem) and the physical intimacy of the close-up.*

Through this widescreen close-up, the sense of *being there* enters a different register, as it is no longer the case that the cinematography invites the spectator to simply be immersed in the physical space of the action. Instead, it is through an enhanced sense of bodily sympathy that the spectator can encounter the intensity of this pivotal moment in time. The moment generates what Swanson has theorized as a particular form of devotional spectating, in which past and present seem to exist in an interwoven skein, experiencing both a highly emotional present and an evocative historical event (6). In this moment, to paraphrase Griffiths, immersion becomes embodiment, the body of the spectator invited to mimic that of Demetrius, and through this embodied empathy *The Robe* generates another doubling, as the viewer is invited to feel Demetrius's pain *and* that of the Christ hanging in abjection on the Cross (32-33).

It is precisely through the oscillation between the like and the unlike, the body (and particularly the face) of Demetrius and the body of the spectator that *The Robe* invites a deeply contradictory encounter with the Crucifixion, one that is both immediate and forces an acknowledgment of the distance separating the spectator from the represented past.<sup>6</sup> On the one

hand, the embodied sympathy the film encourages between Demetrius' body and that of the spectator seems to engender the type of erasure of distance that David Morgan has theorized as a key aspect of sacred images, in that these images "offered the iconophile the prospect of sacred presence. [...] The act of looking at an image elicited a visceral response: the body participated in an integrated devotional practice [...] The knowledge the devout sought was the body's knowledge, expressed in the language of enfleshed sensations" (66). This moment suggests that the past can be encountered *through* the body, both that of the character and that of the spectators who are invited to identify with him. On the other, the fact that it is *Demetrius* who is directly looking at the abject figure of Christ reinforces the sense of temporal distance that separates the spectator from being fully immersed in this encounter with the divine.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these contradictions, reviews of the time expressed an uneasy pleasure about the widescreen viewing experience. A write-up in the *Independent Exhibitors Film Bulletin* would state about *The Robe* that: "it grips you and holds you for two hours and 15 minutes—and leaves you limp at the end" ("The Robe: Business Rating" 15). The embodied encounter with history is thus framed as both exhilarating and emotionally exhausting, one's body caught up in the paroxysms of physical and emotional agony. Other commentary in the same issue highlighted the emotional and temporal experience provided by both the narrative and the technology utilized to bring it to life. One reviewer enthused: "I was part of the story. I felt as though producer Frank Ross had reached out and yanked me from my seat. I was there on the forbidding hills outside Jerusalem, looking up at Christ bleeding on the Cross. I was there, the unseen spectator, while Pilate's soldiers threw dice for Jesus' Robe. I trod the gloomy catacombs of Imperial Rome, the pillared palaces of Caligula's Rome at the dawn of Christianity. The emotional experience was unforgettable" ("Does CinemaScope?" 7).

These comments highlight the powerful affect generated by the feeling of immersion, the sense that the spectator has experienced an interfolding of space and time. However, the reviews also indicate the extent to which this mingling of temporalities, particularly the blending of 20<sup>th</sup> century and antiquity, contains within it a measure of threat and violence, as suggested by the language of being “yanked” from the seat, the “forbidding hills” and “gloomy catacombs.” Just as widescreen contained a mingled pleasure and threat of bodily contact and suffocating intimacy, so the psychological/emotional transgression of time carries a measure of anxiety as one inhabits an ancient world unbound by the rules governing the modern one.

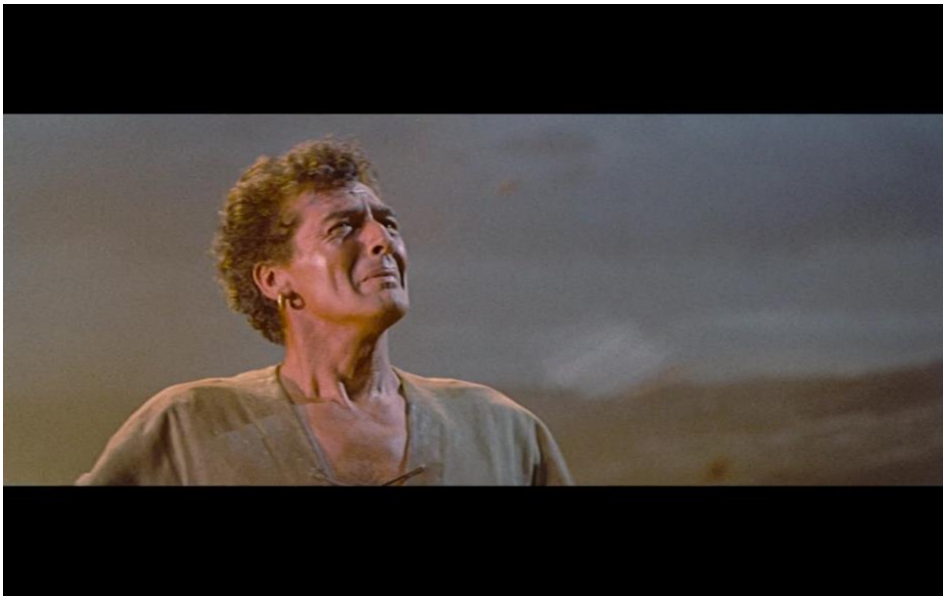
As we saw in the first chapter, mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century American culture, in particular Christian theology, remained concerned with the inexorability of modern time and with the alternative seemingly offered by a specifically Christian understanding of temporality. The theologian John Marsh, for example, argued that “to twentieth-century man time seems to be a one-way street; the traffic flows in one direction only [...] the Bible cannot accept such a view of time [...] the fundamental biblical category, we believe, is that of ‘fulfillment.’” He suggests this involves a “reaching out across or beyond the successions of chronological time to an event-sequence apprehended by faith as the final deliverance of this world by God” (157-168). By providing a cinematic experience that aims for full immersion in the world of antiquity, *The Robe* suggests that it remains possible to encounter this pivotal moment as if it were taking place in the present. One can experience a different sort of time than the relentless forward movement of modern, historical temporality.

*The Robe* further suggests that it is possible to experience, if only temporarily, a moment when the evils of history are granted a meaning that goes beyond this tremendously agonized encounter with Christ’s abjection. As the prominent Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr

would write in his 1949 book *Faith and History*, through an encounter with Christ's revelation "man has made contact with the divine power, which is able to overcome not only the ambiguity in which all human life and history is involved but also the evils of history which are due to man's abortive efforts to overcome them through his own resources" (126). He goes on to say that Christ's death on the cross, though seemingly an historical failure, represents both an end and a new beginning. "The affirmation that Christ is the end of history signifies that in His [sic] life, death, and resurrection the meaning of man's historic existence is fulfilled" (139). This idea that it is through Christ's fulfillment of history that man's finitude and its attendant evils are resolved, so radically at odds with modernity's insistence that they may be overcome through the unfolding of secular history, offers a unique hopefulness. The suffering of Christ on the cross, its witnessing by Demetrius and the spectator, and the sense of powerlessness engendered by both narrative and the appeal of widescreen produce a sense that history has a higher sacred and historical purpose than might be evident to those entrapped in the present.

Thus, I read the Crucifixion scene in the *Robe* as responding at least in part to the desire to re-encounter that prior moment, to "reach out across" the boundaries of seemingly irreversible chronology, to walk along the same hills as Demetrius, and to encounter with him the same sense of abject helplessness at watching Christ suffer on the Cross (*figure 11*). Given the extra-dietgetic pressure of the seeming end of the world, this sense of escape promises not only that it is indeed possible to come to God—to experience, through heightened affect and bodily engagement, the actual Crucifixion—but that it is possible to escape the pressures of the inevitable nuclear apocalypse. The sense of being present forces an experience of history in which one has to acknowledge the absolute necessity of Christ's death, even as the witnessing to such an event, evidenced by Demetrius' tortured face, reminds us of the mingled pathos and

horror such an event entails. The fact that one of the shots of the Crucifixion sequence occurs from above the Cross (again keeping Christ's face obscured), invites the feeling that one can escape from the corporeal world that Christ currently suffers, even as it switches back to the very real human consequences of this historical event.



*Figure 11. The agony of the Crucifixion reflected on Victor Mature's flawed features.*

The scene immediately following the Crucifixion continues to turn up the emotional volume, as Demetrius is overwrought by the fact that his master is directly responsible for the death of the one whom he has so recently come to serve. Screaming insults at Marcellus in the rain, he condemns both the centurion and the empire of which he is a representative, and the confrontation between the two men serves as a moment of release, when the powerlessness that has so far characterized Demetrius and the sympathetic/empathetic spectator is at last counteracted by his moment of rebellion. The almost hysterical mode in which this scene takes place seems designed to sweep up the spectator in that flow of repressed emotion and to allow for an overcoming of the impotence that had characterized the previous scene. The film again invites the spectator to feel *with* Demetrius as he finally proclaims his liberty from slavery.

Yet the film also has to contend with the reality that while the Crucifixion—and the Resurrection that follows it—seems to redeem history, the historical world continues onward. In that sense, the film also contends with the fact of time’s inexorability, which it usefully puts in tension with the escape from that flow that Christ seems to represent. Bettina Bildhauer has compellingly argued that the epic as a genre offers a commingling of various times: “the genre is based not only on an analogical similarity between past and present but on a multilayered view of time [...] A genre that is replete with chronotopic complexity, the epic may be said to stage a contest of temporal modes” (124). In staging the Passion and its aftermath, *The Robe* partakes of two strands of time that, Mary Ann Doane suggests, were and are key to the ways that cinema as a medium contends with the particular pressures exerted by modernity.

From its beginnings, Doane argues, cinema engaged with the question of temporality, straddling a line between the present and the past. “In its dominant historical development,” she argues, “it [cinema] has become the narrativization of chance, the historicization of the present [...] The lure of contingency, the fascination of a present moment in which anything can happen, is safely deployed. The present—as the mark of contingency in time—is made tolerable, readable, and, not least, pleasurable” (107). At the same time as it presents the infinite possibilities of the contingent and the present—recall that one of the key selling points of CinemaScope and its successors was the promise of presence—cinema also engages in an “irreversible linearity.” (113). As Jacques Aumont points out, “filmic time was given as a time to which one submits” (245), suggesting that there are limits to how much cinema is able to play with the irreversibility of time. Part of the experience of watching a film, Aumont suggests, involves succumbing to this projection time and accepting it as one’s own.

Doane's and Aumont's careful delineation of the competing notions of time embedded within the moving image allow for a more nuanced understanding of the competing temporalities that also emerge from within the historico-biblical epic. A widescreen epic such as *The Robe* suggests that the modern spectator can encounter this sacrificial moment even as it also holds out the promise, eternally unfulfilled, that Christ may yet be saved by some unforeseen event. To refer back to Griffith's formulation at the beginning of this chapter, the immersive, affective power enabled by widescreen technologies allows for the feeling of going elsewhere, even as the narrative of the Passion allows for the simultaneously comforting and dismaying knowledge that Christ's death is inevitable as well as necessary and transcendent.

Thus, while the *The Robe* suggests that Christ offers his followers an escape from both the horror of slavery and the power over history that the Roman Empire seems to possess, it also acknowledges that the power of Rome *is* the power of history. For all that Christ may have escaped, and while there is the *promise* that his time on earth has marked a significant shift in the trajectory of history, the film's narrative seems to contradict this optimism. Christ's followers become subject to the wrath of Rome, in particular the sadistic attentions of Caligula. Again, this manifests itself in terms of the body, as Demetrius is ultimately captured and submitted to the sadistic torments that the demented emperor can devise. The widened screen enables a particularly grotesque display of Victor Mature's spread-eagled form on the torturer's table, a scene reminiscent of the torments inflicted on his earlier hero, Samson. Here, the bodily sympathy encouraged by CinemaScope blurs into the realm of the horrific, as the viewer remains subjected to the intensely embodied sight of Mature's oversized, carnal body undergoing the torture of the flesh. In contrast to the on-time and the too-late that characterized the Crucifixion scene, here the film invites the spectator to experience something of a too-soon moment and to



experience a mingled thrill and pleasure at seeing the body in torment (a common feature of the epic, as Heston's ample afflictions attest).

Much as Demetrius is subjected to the wrath of the emperor, so Marcellus finds himself caught up in forces that he cannot control. As a result, he is finally brought before the emperor for judgment and a last chance at pardoning. The final sequence of the film, in which Marcellus is put on trial before the entire imperial court, situates the spectator among those gathered to witness—switching between several different positions among the crowd—encouraging an uncomfortable sense of complicity and sense of powerlessness in not being able to do anything to intervene in the events unfolding. As with the scene of the Crucifixion, the cinematography here invites a sense of mingled immersion and powerlessness, for while the spectator may be led to feel that they are actually *there*, they are also as impotent as the characters—either the heroes about to be sent to martyrdom or the court standing by and watching—to effect change or to thwart the will of the power-mad Caligula and the Roman state of which he is the representative.

The staging of Marcellus' and Diana's final march to their doom captures the sense of temporal plenitude that characterizes the film as a whole. If the trial scene itself emphasized a sense of bearing witness to events that were transpiring right before the eyes and body of the spectator, the march to the archery field and the subsequent execution emphasizes the inability of the individual to contest the forces of history, with immersion and narrative progression continuing to exist in tension. Again, the form and the content of the historico-biblical forces an encounter with the irrevocable terror of history, even as it also seeks to provide an escape from it. When the two characters march onward and upward, the heavenly chorus that accompanies their movement and the gradual fading of the image suggest that the couple has at last escaped from the power of Rome. However, as Stephen C. Meyer usefully points out, "that kingdom is

not of this world: it is noumenal rather than phenomenal” (112). Further, the overwhelming nature of the widescreen image also bears with it the reminder of their death, suggesting that the terror of history is not so easily escaped.

Produced in a period of significant technological, social, and political shifts, *The Robe* makes use of a new cinematic technology to provide an experience of antiquity marked by a set of internal contradictions that it can never satisfactorily resolve. The pressures of historical awareness constantly work to undercut the escape from history that Christ promises. Just as he becomes a sacrifice, necessary for the redemption of history’s fulfillment (even as it continues on without him), so those who follow him, both inside and outside the theater, remain entrapped in their own embodied experiences of time.

#### Embracing the Here and Now in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*

If Christ actually appears during the course of *The Robe*, His presence continues to recede further into historical time in its sequel, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, in which the titular character finds his faith continually tested by the villainous forces of ancient Rome. Through Demetrius’ crisis of faith, the film interrogates the limits of the influence of the divine fulfillment and redemption of profane, secular time. While one strand of the film suggests that Christ can still offer the hope of an escape from, and possibly a fulfillment of, the material world in which the characters find themselves, another level relies instead on the thrills and pleasures of the arena and the bedroom, heightened by CinemaScope to offer a sensual immersion in the world of embodied pleasure.

The film picks up where *The Robe* left off. Indeed, it was pushed into production before its predecessor had even finished filming, in the hopes that it would be able to capitalize on the

anticipated success of its predecessor and continue the showcasing of CinemaScope. In this film, Demetrius continues to run afoul of the power-mad Caligula, who has become convinced that the robe from the previous film holds the promise of eternal life. Meanwhile, Demetrius loses faith in the idea Christ has any earthly power and gives himself over to a life of combat in the arena and a sexual liaison with the debauched Messalina (Susan Hayward). Gradually, however, he finds himself drawn back to the faith by the apostle Peter (Michael Rennie), and in the end the Christians emerge triumphant while Caligula is assassinated and succeeded by Claudius and a repentant Messalina.

The trailer for the film, in keeping with the pattern set by *The Robe*, stresses the power of CinemaScope to bring the viewer into the space of the action, to encounter at the level of the body the pleasures and terrors of life in the arena. The trailer proclaims: “*You are there* in the arena as you become a *thrilling, breathing* part of the deadliest sport ever devised by man [...] *You are there* as the wanton temptress Messalina pits her beguiling beauty against one man’s mortal weakness.” While the trailer’s emphasis on the “you are there” clearly ties in to earlier marketing discourses surrounding widescreen and the power of presence, it also draws upon the desire of audiences to engage physically, to feel the sense of carnal excitement that comes with bodily agency. Note, for example, its appeal to the body of the spectator with the mention of “thrilling” and “breathing,” both of which suggest that the film’s dominant appeal lies in its ability to produce in the viewer a sense of bodily precarity that mirrors that of the characters in the diegesis. While *The Robe* relied more upon the sense of the sacred in its appeal to the spectator, *Demetrius* appeals to the thrill of combat and the allure of sex.

The film begins with a reminder of the events that transpired in the previous film, i.e. the sentencing and eventual death of Marcellus and Diana at the orders of the power-mad Caligula.

This event plants the seeds for Demetrius' doubt, as he struggles with the idea that two people who believed so strongly in the divine power of Christ could not be saved from death. The scene which follows, in which the Christian community gathers in the catacombs, reinforces the film's (and Demetrius') preoccupation with death and with the tangible, corporeal consequences of adherence to this new faith. Faith in Christ, while it promises escape from the vicissitudes of the material world, cannot be *seen* but instead must be *felt*. As Caligula says to his uncle Claudius, "Everyone fears death," and this appears to be true for at least some of the fledgling Christians.

Like so many other heroes of the midcentury epic, Demetrius consistently finds himself robbed of agency by the powers of a rapacious Roman state. While he tries to hide the robe from Caligula's forces, his attempts to do so result in his being sentenced to the life in the gladiatorial school. However, his Christian faith prevents him from being able to take the life of another. He has the ability to survive in the arena, but only just, his life constantly threatened by the possibility that he will join Marcellus and Diana in the death that awaits those who displease the emperor. Unlike Christ, who was able to escape from the world of the flesh and its associated torments, Demetrius remains enmeshed in the toils of historical, material, embodied time.

As a result of his refusal to fight in the arena in the way that is expected of him, Demetrius gradually comes to occupy a subaltern position within the hierarchy established within the *ludus*, and it is his subordinate position that inadvertently leads to a pivotal moment in which the other gladiators, including the sadistic Dardanius (Richard Egan), decide to assault the innocent Lucia (Debra Paget). The moment is one of the film's most melodramatic, and it exposes the extent to which the film and the genre relies upon an ongoing and ultimately irresolvable tension between immersive presence and melodramatic affect. As the other gladiators continue to pull Lucia away (with the heavily implied threat of imminent rape),

Demetrius finds that he can do nothing to save her. This moment is especially resonant for both Demetrius and the spectator for the camera focuses again on his anguished expression as he remains powerless to save his beloved, just as he was helpless to save Christ as he hung on the Cross in the previous film. Demetrius' strangled cry of help to Christ which, unfortunately, goes unanswered in the physical world, corresponds to the fleshly agony that registers on Mature's materially flawed features. At this point, Demetrius fails to recognize the fact that Christ's hope for the corporeal world rests not with his ability to intervene in it, but instead to offer a measure of solace beyond the confines of the corporeal world that his disciples inhabit.

Mistakenly believing that Lucia has perished during her ordeal, Demetrius abandons his faith in Christ and decides to engage in precisely the arena blood-letting that he had resisted earlier in the film. Embracing the darker side of himself, he succeeds in killing those who were responsible for Lucia's assault; for Demetrius, and through him the spectator, the arena offers a particular form of control that stands in marked contrast to the sense of powerlessness and abjection that marked the Crucifixion and the assault, in which all parties seem to be tangled in a web of agony and powerlessness from which none can ultimately escape. This sense of bodily agency, Richard Dyer argues, is a key component of the appeals of both cinema in general and the particular genres—such as the action film and the epic—that are designed to satisfy our desire “for an underlying pattern of feeling, to do with freedom of movement, confidence in the body, engagement with the material world, that is coded as male (and straight and white, too) but to which all humans need access” (9). As noted in my discussion of the trailer, the film suggests that, while Christ may exist beyond the bounds of the fleshly and the corporeal, those left behind—including, presumably those in the audience watching the film—feel pangs of doubt that only the body can fully assuage. Demetrius' decision to give in to the violence of the arena,

betray his Christian principles, and kill those responsible for the assault on Lucia signifies his symbolic reclamation of his own agency. At this moment in the film, the passivity associated with the Christian way of life—which claimed the life of Marcellus, Diana, and seemingly Lucia—seems to be incompatible with physical survival in the harsh, cruel world that Caligula and Rome represent.

At a larger social level, Demetrius' embrace of the arena and the concomitant spectacle of the physical agony of his fellow gladiators performs what Ina Rae Hark has referred to as a sort of "sympathetic magic, an exorcism of the male's worst fears of becoming irrelevant to the postwar social and economic order through the very act of suffering the loss of physical power and social authority" (118). Just as importantly, the displacement of affect from the vulnerability associated with religious conversion—which was a key concern, as James Gilbert asserts, for many men who seemed reluctant to publicly embrace the conversion of such evangelists as Billy Graham—onto the violent interactions among male bodies helps to assuage the male weakness exposed during the events of *The Robe* (Gilbert 106-134). The body is no longer invulnerable but is instead an effective weapon.

Furthermore, Demetrius comes to believe that only by abandoning himself to the pleasures of the body, both violence *and* sex, can he find an alternative to this world that he inhabits. Indeed, his descent into sexual debauchery with the Empress Messalina represents in the film's imaginary an escape from the terrors of history that he has already experienced and witnessed in the course of both *The Robe* and *Demetrius*. As he says to her during one taut moment in the film, "I rejected mine [his god] because what he taught was against all reason and reality [...] There is no past, no future. Only now." As Ruiz suggests, one of the strategies human beings utilize to escape from the terrors of history is an emphasis on the pleasures of the

flesh and the sensual, and such certainly seems to be the case here (120-127). For Demetrius, abandoning himself to the pleasures of sex becomes a means of forgetting about the secular world and all of its terrors (namely the power of Caligula and the fragility of human life in the Empire), as well as the failures of the spiritual world that had seemed to hold out such promise. Christ may remain invisible and unable to intervene in the events of the material world, but Demetrius can and does so. Through the power of the technology of CinemaScope, as the trailer points out, the film encourages the spectator to encounter a similar feeling of physical empowerment and somatic empathy.

Of course, the film also works overtime in its narrative to counter/control the pleasures and perils posed by embodiment and immersion. Thus, for all that Messalina is a tremendously alluring figure, and while it is the bloodshed and visceral experience of the arena that stand as the film's affective centers (and a key part of its marketing), it is ultimately the promise of transcendence and escape offered by Christ that rescues Demetrius, and through him the spectator, from his headlong plunge into the darkness and entrapment of the body. Only after he has renounced the reliance upon the material world, in particular his own body, is he able to return to the fold of Christianity that he had so firmly renounced earlier in the film. In contrast to Caligula, who seeks out the robe in the hopes of attaining eternal life in the material, fleshly world, Demetrius recognizes that his only hope exists in that which cannot be seen. In doing so, he also forces contemporary spectators to place their faith not on the historical reality they inhabit, either in their lived experience or in the filmic world, but instead in the divine that resists visual representation.

While one strand of the film emphasizes the promise that the crucified and resurrected Christ offers an escape from the historical world of ancient Rome, the other suggests that the

body can also offer a means of coping with the vicissitudes of history (again represented by the power of Rome). The uneasy fit between narrative/moral cohesion and direct/unmediated access to the past dovetails here to render a certain measure of incoherence. Christ, both narratively and figuratively, continues to recede into the past. Of all the characters that appear, only Demetrius and Peter have ever had the signature experience of seeing Christ in the flesh, a fact reinforced by Demetrius' flashback to the moment when he stood at the foot of the Cross. For the others, their access to him is mediated through Demetrius. This dilemma also faces the characters in a similarly themed film *The Silver Chalice* (1954), in which characters struggle to remember what Christ looked like before it is too late and he has passed utterly out of living memory.

For a film such as *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, Christ offers at best a phantasmagoric promise of an escape from the material world. The ending shot of the film, in which Demetrius, Peter, and the African king Glycon march toward the camera, emphasizes the film's ambiguous relationship to the body and embodied agency (*figure 12*). For these characters, unlike Marcellus and Diana in *The Robe*, the redemption is indeed a part of the physical world, their powerful physiques and confident strides a strikingly worldly counterpoint to the seemingly transcendental "wedding" march performed by their martyred predecessors. While the film clearly wants the spectator to seize on to these more spiritual elements, it also aims to produce the very embodied desires and sensations that work against that transcendence. As the critic Ivan Spear would put it in *Boxoffice*, the film tries to appeal to the religiously-oriented as well as those who are "more materialistic and earthy in their film tastes" (18).





Figure 12. *The three heroes stride forcefully into the future.*

#### Enmeshed in the Gears of the World in *Barabbas*

Like *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Barabbas*, the widescreen film with which I conclude this chapter, also deals with the aftermath of the Passion. However, whereas the previous film ultimately espoused an optimistic view of the value of that sacrifice, *Barabbas* remains far more existentially pessimistic in its outlook and in its conclusion. Shot in Technirama, and in some locations exhibited in Super Technirama 70, the film was produced by the Italian Dino De Laurentiis.<sup>7</sup> I include it here both because it was seen by the trade press as part of the cycle of biblical epics that had characterized the previous decade, and because it was directed by an American (Robert Fleischer, famous for such other epics as *The Vikings*) and starred an American actor (Anthony Quinn) in the title role, as well as a number of other Hollywood actors including Ernest Borgnine, Jack Palance, Arthur Kennedy, and Katy Jurado. Furthermore, studies of the epic film, such as the monographs by Babington and Evans and Derek Elley, include it as part of the midcentury cycle. In terms of my discussion of widescreen and affect, the film's production in Technirama allowed for both the sort of vast panoramas and simultaneous

focus on the tribulations of the body that were associated with other films of widescreen proportions (including, incidentally, *Spartacus*, which was also shot and exhibited in Technirama and Super Technirama 70).<sup>8</sup> If both *The Robe* and *Demetrius* ultimately suggested that time, history, and the body could be escaped through the redemptive power of Christ—even if their representational strategies for doing so undercut that message—*Barabbas* seeks to immerse its protagonist and the spectator in a brutal, bloody world that remains, even at the end of the film, unredeemed.

Several trade reviews of the period took note of impact of the widescreen experience of the story of the man who was pardoned so that Christ would meet his fate on the Cross. The *Independent Exhibitors Film Bulletin*, for example, pointed out that the film was “filled with sequences overwhelming and breathtaking on the Technicolor-Technirama screen, yet basically the intimate story of one man’s tormented struggle to reconcile his violent life with the irresistible force of Christianity” [...] in utilizing every inch of the giant screen with an eye towards visual splendor, he [Fleischer] has created some truly memorable sequences (“Barabbas” 13). Note in this description those aspects of the widescreen image that had been noted in previous iterations, the adjectives “overwhelming” and “breathtaking” gesturing toward the twinned anxiety and pleasure of seeing the ancient world brought to life and in particular of the embodied sensations it evoked due to its widescreen filming and exhibition.

Furthermore, mainstream reviews of the time also took note of the prominence of Anthony Quinn’s brooding and obtrusive physicality.<sup>9</sup> Bosley Crowther, always ready with a wise crack or two (especially for an epic film), calls *Barabbas* “a great brute of a fellow,” noting in particular that “Mr. Quinn is a sensational sufferer. He grunts and sweats and strains with more credible vengeance and exertion than any actor we can name” (47). However, critical

ambivalence around the film also centered on the centrality of violence to its narrative and the way in which it seems to assault the viewer with the relentlessly bloody and violent world of antiquity. The above review from *Film Bulletin*, for example, noted that there would be controversy around the film: “some viewers will probably consider many of the sequences too brutal and violent. But these were barbarous, turbulent times. They have been presented graphically, yet within context of the period” (13).

The film follows the titular Barabbas as he first encounters the death of Christ on the cross in his stead and then falls afoul of the Roman Empire, and he finds that as a result of the exchange of Christ’s life for his own he cannot die. When he continues to find himself on the wrong side of Roman law, he is eventually sentenced to a life of enslavement in the sulfur mines of Sicily, where he spends several decades in slavery. After a fortuitous mine disaster sets him free, he then ends up in the arena, where he eventually earns his freedom. However, he once again cannot keep away from prison, and after being implicated in the fire of Rome, he is sentenced to death as a Christian. The film ends with Barabbas crucified and ultimately offering his spirit to the darkness that surrounds him.

In its plot, the film mirrors *Demetrius and the Gladiators*—and, to an extent, *King of Kings*—but it takes a much bleaker, pessimistic view of the escape that Christ seemingly offers. Further, with its widescreen emphasis on the cinema of the palpable—to paraphrase Steve Neale in his discussion of the use of the Technirama frame in *Spartacus*—the film, in both its composition and its narrative, stresses the irresolvable tension between the body and the spirit (103). As Derek Elley points out, the film remains preoccupied with a number of tensions: between darkness and light, chaos and order, barbarity and civilization (126-127), and to this I

would add that it remains concerned with the escape from history and the embeddedness of the body within the material world.

Like *The Robe* and *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Barabbas* takes extravagant pains to suture the spectator into the *time* of the Crucifixion, encouraging a feeling of co-presence with both Barabbas and his struggles to make sense of the events that transpire. In fact, the scene in which Christ's death coincides with a complete solar eclipse was itself filmed on location during a complete solar eclipse. The promotional material for the film, particularly the theatrical trailer, highlighted this as one of the film's central appeals, telescoping the past and the present and suggesting that this film—which “begins where the other big ones leave off”—provides a new kind of access to the historically transcendent moment of the Crucifixion. Barabbas, and through him the spectator, is a witness to this pivotal historical moment; unlike his predecessors in the genre, however, he cannot make sense of what has transpired, for he can never quite escape his body and the limitations it imposes upon his consciousness. At several key moments in the film the camera coincides with Barabbas' perspective to create a sense of disorientation and confusion, as when he emerges from imprisonment and the bright sunlight obscures his vision—and the spectator's—of Christ, who remains shrouded in a piercing glow. In wedding the vision of the spectator to that of Barabbas, this key moment allows for an experience of his conflicted subjectivity and his continually unsuccessful struggle to understand the importance of Christ, either to his own life or to the broader historical world in which they are both located.

A great deal of the unsuccessful struggle that motivates so much of the film stems from the nature of his body. As the reviews illustrate, Quinn, like Mature, possesses a markedly less chiseled physique than a Kirk Douglas or a Charlton Heston. If possible, he is also less eloquent than many of his epic cinematic counterparts, his mumbling delivery of his dialogue lending an

almost animalistic quality to the character of Barabbas. The reprobate criminal that Quinn is at pains to create is a man largely driven by his bodily pleasures, such as when he makes a mockery of the Last Supper, feasting and drinking with the other members of the tavern that he frequents and indulging in an illicit sexual affair while waiting for the three days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Part of this has to do with the fact that the original novel is told primarily through internal monologue, so that Quinn's body must come to bear the full force of externalizing Barabbas' internal spiritual and mental conflict(s), but an equal part comes from Quinn's roles in films preceding this one, in which he frequently portrayed characters defined by their physicality, such as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1956).

As Barabbas quickly comes to realize, Christ's death has not, in fact, saved him from the material world, but has instead ensured that he remains enmeshed within it. This point is brought home to him when he encounters Lazarus who, though he has been rescued from death by Christ's powers, remains a ghostly, horrifying figure. As Richard Walsh puts it, "Jesus' choice [to resurrect Lazarus] is damning, not salvific" (120). Though both Barabbas and Lazarus have been "saved" from the nothingness of death, the film remains reluctant to allow their physical reality—either their material bodies or their surroundings—to reflect any sort of substantive transcendent change. This world remains as viscerally violent as before, a fact brought home by the stoning of Barabbas' love Rachel (Silvana Mangano), a "portrait of ecstatic martyrdom" (58). To put it in Williams' terms, Rachel's death is too-soon (she has come to the faith before Christianity has yet become dominant), on-time (she will be reunited with Christ in death), and too-late (in that Barabbas has no chance to save her).

It is the sulfur mines of Sicily, however, that represent in the film's imagination the ultimate moment of physical and temporal imprisonment, a descent, as the Roman governor

phrases it, into the underworld itself. The sequence begins with a panoramic shot so familiar from other widescreen epics—it bears a striking resemblance to the opening scenes of *Spartacus*, for example—situating Barabbas in the wide world of nature. At this last pivotal moment, he stands against this backdrop, free of the stifling streets of Jerusalem and allowed to encounter the space of the wider world. At the same time, the dimensions of the space emphasize Barabbas’ smallness, his frame diminished against the vastness of the mountains behind him.

Despite the beauty and the vastness of the landscape that graces the widened screen however, the screen soon transitions into a very different sort of world. The widescreen composition heightens the sense of claustrophobia these scenes evoke, and as Jon Solomon puts it “for minutes we are plunged into an inhumane, troglodytic darkness in the bowels of a mountain” (201). Denied the ability to die, and imprisoned in a space both diegetically and cinematically crowded with his fellow slaves and the machinery of slavery, Barabbas toils away in a seemingly meaningless repetition. Throughout the sulfur mine sequences, the combination of increasingly tight framing (an ironic use of the expanded Technirama ratio) and the atmosphere of yellow dust and heaving slave bodies generate what Nick Pinkerton has identified as “genuine isolation and claustrophobia” (n.p.n.). The film imprisons Barabbas’ body, restricting his movement within the frame and inviting a sense of unquiet pleasure on the part of the spectator, who experiences a measure (vicarious, to be sure) of the drudgery and horror of Roman enslavement. While the Christian Sahak (Vittorio Gassman) appears to offer Barabbas yet another chance to see meaning in his life and the fact that he was spared, neither he nor the spectator can see beyond the physical world of the mine.

It is only when Barabbas enters the arena to fight for his life that he seems at last to be able to forge a meaningful connection between his body and the world he inhabits. These

sequences, as the reviews point out, are breathtaking and exciting both because they fit into the existing paradigm of the historico-biblical epic and, just as importantly, because they seek to elicit in the spectator a feeling of freedom that is in marked contrast to the preceding scenes in the sulfur mines. Through these embodied sensations *Barabbas*, like *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, suggests that through the body Barabbas can at last gain a measure of control *and* understanding of his place in this barbaric, cruel world. “I’ll take this life [...] A man can understand this,” he says to Sahak. The film provides him with the means of taking control of his own destiny. While he remains subject to the will of the Roman state, he also has the potential to earn his freedom or death, either of which would mark an escape from the repetition in which he has so far been entrapped.

As Sahak points out, the Christians of the film desire a world that does not rely so much on the processes of the body—feasting, sex, the brutal violence of the arena—and yet this is precisely the world that the film takes great pains to create visually and in which it seeks to immerse the spectator. Hence the feeling of pathos the film invites when Sahak meets his grisly death at the hands of the sadistically gleeful Torvald (Jack Palance)—in which the latter spears the former in a rain-drenched, empty arena—and the feeling of excitement and release when Barabbas manages to outwit him and deliver his vengeance. The execution of Torvald at Barabbas’ hands stands in contrast to all that the Christians in the film have encouraged him to believe, and yet at both a narrative and experiential level it is carnally, viscerally satisfying.

The final sequence of the film cements this pessimism that has characterized so much of the narrative. Executed alongside other Christians for his part in the burning of Rome, Barabbas hangs on a cross, his similarity to Christ brought to a fitting, if bleak, conclusion. When he finally prepares to die, Barabbas does not commend his spirit to either the Father or the Son, but

instead to “the darkness,” his final words conveying uncertainty rather than final absolution. The spectator, encouraged throughout the film to encounter the world of the flesh and the harrowing of the body, is likewise denied the escape that Christ seemingly promises, the final image of the film the crucified body of the (anti)hero.

Barabbas’ death renders him into nothing more than inanimate flesh, denied the symbolic restoration that Paul Willemen identifies as one of the “unquiet pleasures” associated with genres such as the epic (16). As he does in the other films discussed in this chapter, Christ remains frustratingly, tantalizingly out of reach, either for Barabbas or for the spectator, “suggesting significance without providing clear meaning” (Meyer 208). He remains somewhere outside of the frame, the widescreen epic space once again denying the very sense of union with the past that it seems to promise. Perhaps Christ exists somewhere in the darkness to which Barabbas has consigned his soul, but the abrupt introduction of “The End” undercuts whatever notes of salvation remain.

### Conclusion

As I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, the post-war historico-biblical epic can and should be understood as a mode of historical engagement that reveals a great deal about how American culture understood itself and its place within history. The Passion, and the conversion that typically takes place in its aftermath, provided a particularly potent narrative through which to seemingly provide an experience outside, or in opposition to, the seeming relentlessness of modern time and the terrors of history. While on the one hand the epic promises an escape from the rootedness of the corporeal, material world, on the other it continues to



emphasize precisely those elements in its (re)creation of the ancient world and in its embodied appeals to the modern spectator.

It is useful in this regard to compare the widescreen epic with its pre-widescreen counterparts such as *Quo Vadis*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy and released in 1951. Like the later films discussed in this chapter, *Quo Vadis* concerns itself with the conflict between the nascent Christian faith and the powerful historical force of Rome. For the characters in this film (as well as others like it, such as *The Silver Chalice*, released in 1954), Christ exists in an even more distant space than he does in the Passion epics. Thus, the only access to the Christ encounter that the characters—and, through them, the spectator—possess is thoroughly mediated by those who were actually present. In the case of *Quo Vadis*, that takes the form of the apostle Peter, who can only relate incidents such as the Last Supper, which are rendered visually less as immersive spectacle than as devotional religious iconography (the scene itself is staged and framed very much like Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*). The cinematography of a pre-widescreen film such as *Quo Vadis* relies more upon traditional patterns of editing and cinematography, encouraging a sense of passive spectating rather than active immersion.<sup>10</sup> While there are several shots of spectacular scenes—including the viscerally terrifying arena and the celebrations in honor of Nero—the spectacle cannot quite overcome the limits imposed by the Academy Ratio screen. As a result, through a combination of narrative devices and formal filmmaking conventions, pre-widescreen epics largely figure history as just another film to be observed rather than an event in which the spectator can bodily participate.

Thus, although widescreen antiquity holds out the promise that the contemporary spectator can transgress the limits imposed by the inevitable forward movement of time, embedded within its own visual rhetoric is a (perhaps unwitting) acknowledgment of the limits

of such a transgression. Though the epic seems to satisfy the desire to inhabit the past, such a desire itself forces an acceptance of the fact that the past remains fundamentally inaccessible. While it may be tempting to label this one of the aesthetic shortcomings of the genre, I would suggest instead that it is the inevitable result of almost any type of historical engagement. As the historian Frank Ankersmit has compellingly put it, “the historical search for our former identity is motivated by the desire to become this identity again; but each time part of the past identity has, in fact, been recaptured, a new dimension has (unintentionally) been added to the difference between a former and our present identity” (328-329). The epic speaks on behalf of a culture desperately trying, and never quite succeeding, to escape the limitations of embodiment and the perpetual movement of the present.

While the epic came to be associated with the widescreen formats in which it was often exhibited, it was also utilized to showcase the power of another cinematic technology: color. With its vibrant color palettes—often but not always provided by Technicolor—the epic presented a vital, fantastic world of sexual desire and pleasure. Like widescreen, color was, and is, understood to provide a particularly somatic, corporeal experience of the film image, holding out the allure of the sensual and the haptic. As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, this would have significant consequences for how the historico-biblical epic understood history, and sex, to function.

### Chapter 3—The (Un)Fortunate Fall into Color: Desire, Death, and the Technicolor Sex Drive

Cecil B. DeMille once remarked that “an audience of churchgoers could enjoy having their libido stimulated, so long as the sinners were punished in the final reel by an avenging God” (qtd. in Sova 273). Though quite possibly apocryphal, DeMille’s sly comment nevertheless reveals the fraught pleasures at the heart of the epic: the conjoining of the competing impulses of death and desire, transgression and punishment, sadism and masochism. Some studies of the epic argue that the retributive violence of God’s punishment reminds the spectator of the wages of sin, a dire warning about the power of sexuality to push the individual out of the social order and into a dangerous world without meaning.<sup>1</sup> Others, however, have argued that it is precisely the tension between punishment and wickedness that defines the uneasy pleasure associated with the genre.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, fantastic displays of decadence and sexuality had long been associated with the appeals of the epic—DeMille’s 1932 *The Sign of the Cross*, with its bath in asses’ milk, lesbian seduction scene, and frenzied arena sacrifices is but one example—but the reintroduction of the ancient world into postwar Hollywood filmmaking in the brash, violent hues of Technicolor brought a new layer of complexity to the genre’s expression of deadly, destructive desire. With its appeal to the body and to the sexual instincts, color disrupts the deceptively clean moral binary these films establish.

In this chapter, I examine the intertwining of desire, death, and color in three early postwar epic films: *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *David and Bathsheba* (1951), and *Quo Vadis* (1951). Through their evocative Technicolor palettes, these films express and fulfill a utopian wish to escape from the mesh of modern linear historical time—with all its ambivalent

connotations—and into what the classicist Anne Carson has theorized as the “now of desire.” This “now” exists in tension with the sacred thrust of the films’ narratives, which typically punish such desire with death, itself often presented as a pleasurable experience. These epics contend with the multiple, often competing pressures of the immediate post-World War II era: the trauma of the war itself, the atomic threat and the imperiled future, the disruptions to gender posed by the war and its aftermath, and the imperative to produce children and the rampant drive for consumerism. In particular, I argue that the genre’s structuring tension between libidinal indulgence and punitive destruction responds to the postwar conflation of erotic desire and atomic annihilation. These films provide the unsettling pleasure of embracing the seemingly contradictory impulses of desire and death, their dynamic Technicolor dreamscapes binding together the perpetual present offered by the former with the absolute pleasure of the latter.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I outline the historical context of the late 1940s and the very beginning of the 1950s, a period in which the disruption to sexual identities produced by World War II intersected with the pessimism and ennui associated with much atomic discourse. At the same time, there was an attempt to restore a gendered instability that had been lost during the preceding decades, through the encouraging of women to return to the home and engage in the consumption of goods for the nuclear household, in the process becoming members of what has been termed as a “consumer’s republic.” Homosexual men faced a similar set of contradictory imperatives, for even as the federal government and other elements of the establishment sought to render them a national security threat, an inchoate queer identity was already taking shape. The epic returned at this time after a period of dormancy, featuring narratives of dangerous women and deadly homosexuals—their vicious allure suffusing the screen in the rich hues of Technicolor—and so I move into a discussion of the ways in which color appeals to and provides

sensual pleasure. As I demonstrate in my subsequent readings of the films, each film engages with the question of death, desire, and the ambivalent relationship between past, present, and future.

The films in this chapter provide an escape from the burdens of temporal awareness and historical responsibility. Produced in a period in which the imminent end became ever more immanent, these early postwar epics use destructive desire to offer, in the words of Ruiz, “not only a palliative to the miseries of everyday life, but, most of all, [a means] to obliterate the self and its historical implications,” revealing a culture in which absolute destruction, and the loss of subjectivity that it entailed, produced both dread and yearning (12). In *Samson and Delilah* this takes the form of Delilah’s deadly desires, which subvert the film’s moral binary and pave the way for the catastrophic, yet satisfying, destruction of the Temple of Dagon at the film’s conclusion. In *David and Bathsheba*, the desire for death seethes beneath the surface of the film’s narrative, puncturing even its final moment of sacred reconciliation with an awareness of the uncertainty of life and the future. I turn last to *Quo Vadis*, in which the narcissistic queerness of Peter Ustinov’s Nero holds out the allure of the pagan secular present rather than the hetero-Christian future, the brutal, orgiastic pleasures of the arena rendered in brilliant, chromatic splendor.

While the type of vibrant, exuberant sexuality on display in these films would occasionally emerge in subsequent epics—in, for example, the Rita Hayworth vehicle *Salome* (1953)—for the most part it would remain subsidiary to the other concerns that would dominate the genre. For much of the 1950s, the epic would favor such theological and historical themes as the birth of freedom (*The Ten Commandments*), the quest for salvation and leadership (*Ben-Hur*), and Christ narratives (*King of Kings*). Significantly, then, the epics discussed in this chapter

emerged at a key moment in Cold War American culture where the hegemonic forces that would govern the rest of the decade (not without contestation) had not yet congealed. The seeds for the various social movements that would emerge in subsequent decades, particularly feminism and gay liberation, had their roots in the war and its immediate aftermath. These films take full advantage of this key moment of flux, providing an outlet for the energies that so many aspects of containment culture struggled to confine, repress, and channel.

### The Body and the Bomb

As scholars have demonstrated, World War II continued to disturb a set of gendered relations that had already endured a series of substantial challenges due to the Great Depression. The historian K.A. Courdileone has argued that the previously established means by which Americans made sense of their lives as gendered subjects had come under threat by the devastating economic downturn. The dominant discourses that suggested that men should be the source of income for the home had been swept away by widespread unemployment in the 1930s, and the subsequent war had sent fathers away from the family while encouraging women to take up the mantle of the breadwinner role (13).

The war also challenged men's and women's expected behaviors. In addition to taking men away from the United States and embroiling them in an armed conflict from which a significant number of them would return with wounds both physical and psychological, the conflict raised disturbing questions about women at home and their seemingly uncontrollable sexual impulses. Miriam Reumann argues in her book *American Sexual Character* that social scientists remained concerned about the challenges that the war had posed to the stability of morality. One noted psychologist pointed out that "war creates a pathological interest in sex"

(Groves v). In addition, “anarchic female sexuality was identified as a prime threat to the war effort, and military and public health campaigns warned patriotic Americans about the dangers of loose ‘victory girls’ who might deliberately or inadvertently carry secrets to the enemy and venereal disease to the troops,” while a similar societal obsession with homosexuality increasingly took shape (Reumann 20). Sex was thus directly connected to national security. This idea that a lack of sexual discipline would inevitably lead to some form of chaos would persist as a dominant strand of postwar discourse. Noteworthy is the fact that it was particularly women and gay men who were understood to pose the greatest risk to the security of the nation, both during the war and, increasingly afterward.

In 1945, the bomb was dropped, the war was won, and it seemed that, at last, the world had been rendered safe. However, given that, as Elaine Tyler May puts it, fears of sexual chaos tend to emerge most strongly in periods of social and cultural tension, it should come as no surprise that anxieties over humanity’s ability to destroy itself should become so thoroughly intertwined with the power of female sexuality. As early as 1946, when the atomic tests at the Bikini Atoll began to occur, one of the bombs was named after Gilda (the *femme fatale* that Rita Hayworth portrayed in the *film noir* of the same name), while “an Air Force plane named ‘Up an’ Atom’ was decorated with a Gilda on its fuselage. Shortly after these tests, the swimwear that bore the name of the site of those tests appeared on the French Riviera, solidifying the correlation between explosive female desirability and atomic destruction (May 111).<sup>4</sup>

As if this were not explicit enough, an officer in a military training video pronounced: “I won’t kid you about the bomb, I’ve seen what it can do . . . It’s deadly, it’s like a woman, I mean never underestimate its power, don’t lose your head, use it” (qtd. In Zarlengo 948). The language in this latter statement suggests that, although the bomb and the woman are powerful forces that

can indeed bring about death and destruction, they can be controlled. All the (presumably male) soldier must do is make sure he uses his head and exercises the cool rationality of the male mind. The bomb and the woman are dangerous, but they are manageable. Or so the dominant discourses encouraged people to believe.

Nor were these comments confined to the military. In 1945, *Life* featured a spread of a young starlet it dubbed the “anatomic bomb.” Her real name was Linda Christians, and she would become the “mascot of the atomic age” (Zarlengo 946). This wedding of the female body with the discourse of the bomb suggested that the seemingly ineffable nature of the atomic bomb could be consumed—visually at least—in much the same way as the female body could. The body and the bomb lend themselves to visual delectation, a pleasure made even more intense due to the danger they both represent to male hegemony. The bombshell—both the literal bomb and its female doppelgänger—stood as a primary threat to the male subject, a reminder of “modern man’s” seemingly relentless desire for self-immolation, whether in the fires of sexual desire or in the conflagration of nuclear annihilation.<sup>5</sup>

It is tempting to dismiss this rhetoric as just so much postwar sexism, a projection of male fantasies and fears onto the figure of the woman/bomb, but such a dismissal risks flattening out the complexity of this homology. Certainly, it was *intended* to be a means of controlling, exoticizing, and eroticizing female sexuality, but it was also a mechanism that acknowledged the unrestrainable power of the bomb and the alluring annihilation it represented. As Barbara Freeman has cogently written of this conflation of desire and the bomb: “the possibility of nuclear extinction reintroduces the question of desire no longer on the scale of the individual or of a chosen race, but of the species. If every fear encases a desire, the site of an unthinkable wish, then ‘nuclear desire’ might be defined as that for a monstrous engulfment of individual



entities and identities.” The ending that the bomb promises is therefore a form of “perverse, or sublime, fulfillment” (313-314). If the end cannot be averted, it can at least be rendered pleausurably satisfying.

This anxiety over the destructive power of female sexuality became a prominent fixation of the immediate postwar years. Many books and editorials struggled with the question of female desire, particularly how and whether women could be sexually satisfied in a postwar world that privileged domestic normality. Foremost among these was the book *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, by Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F. Farnham. The authors take a broad historical view of the problem of contemporary industrialized society, which they understand to be fundamentally unhappy, despite all the material prosperity that has accompanied the forward march of western civilization. As their title suggests, they understand women to be the centerpiece of the problem afflicting the modern world, stating in no uncertain terms: “Women are the principal transmitting media of the disordered emotions that today are so widely spread throughout the world and are reflected in the statistics of social disorder” (23). Only by understanding the sources of this dissatisfaction, they argued, could women be rendered complete and social stability assured.

Central to these unsettled emotions, the authors claim, are the Industrial Revolution, modernity, and the changing dynamics of women’s social and economic roles. They repeatedly emphasize the fact that these moments of social and industrial change forced women out of their former space of the home—in which they allegedly had mastery and a sense of fulfillment—and into the tide of chaotic modernity where they were forced to engage with the world of men (128ff). This shift, they argue, led to all manner of individual ills for women. However, Lundberg and Farnham reserved their greatest ire for feminism, and they forge a particularly strong connection between

women's labor and women's sexual liberation. This lethal combination not only led to the pathologies experienced by women, but also to the psychological castration of men.

They also remain concerned with female desire. Central to the argument of *Modern Woman* is the idea that the woman, to attain sexual and emotional fulfillment, must "accept and love her own womanhood as she loves and accepts her husband's manhood." The woman's role, they go on to note, "is not as easy as rolling off a log [...] It is easier. It is as easy as being the log itself. She cannot fail to deliver a masterly performance, by doing nothing whatever except being duly appreciative and allowing nature to take its course" (237). For the authors, women truly have no sexual agency, and are at best deluded and at worst socially destructive if they perceive that they do. Unsurprisingly, given their avowed investments in understanding the "neuroses" of postwar women, they understand any attempt on the part of women to take an active part in the sex act to be a gesture with grave, possibly even socially catastrophic, consequences.

Despite their claims to historicity and their taking the long view of the development of society (at one point they even turn their gaze back to the scientific discoveries of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment), one can sense in Lundberg's and Farnham's book a fervent, one might even say hysterical, desire to enforce the idea that women are the victims of their own agency. While *Modern Woman's* final conclusions seem to be that women will be happier once they return to the home and find their fulfillment in their roles as mothers and homemakers, the book contains an acknowledgment that female desire exists and that it cannot be so easily restricted to the roles they have set for it. There is more than a faint note of overcompensation in the work, which almost too consistently shows its hand in its attempt to enforce a measure of order on the question of female dissatisfaction that it can never achieve, promising solutions that remain either impracticable or not at all satisfying.

As Betty Friedan would note over a decade later, for all that books like *Modern Woman* attempted to convince women that the problem with their dissatisfaction lay with themselves and their refusal to obey the strictures of the age, many women knew that something was missing in this articulation, and works like *Modern Woman* gave a false diagnosis, providing the wrong solutions to the problem. Furthermore, as influential and popular as this book was, other, competing discourses stressed the agency of women and their ability to seek out their satisfaction—economic, marital, and otherwise—on their own terms (Meyerowitz 1455-1482). The very things that Farnham and Lundberg suggested as solutions, the rearing of children, the neat division of labor between men and women, the channeling of sexual desire into appropriate roles and functions, would ultimately end up producing the very dreary and imprisoning existence, the unhappiness, that such prescriptions were intended to mitigate.

The question of children, so prominent in *Modern Woman*'s prescriptions for postwar women, became increasingly understood as how American citizens could stave off, or at the very least forget about, the doom that lurked outside the home. In 1946, Louisa Randall Church wrote in *American Home* that “parenthood took on added responsibilities of deep and profound significance [...] Upon the shoulders of parents everywhere, rests the tremendous responsibility of sending forth into the next generation men and women imbued with a high resolve to work together for everlasting peace” (18-19). Children, so long as they were raised appropriately by equally well-balanced parents, could help to stave off the seeming inevitability of nuclear apocalypse. As Denis Jonnes puts it, “growing up in a world [...] confronted with possible Armageddon, the young assumed a special value as tokens of the possibility of a future” (162). At the same time, as Church's rhetoric makes clear, they were also a “tremendous responsibility,” yet one more burden that postwar American citizens of both sexes had to

shoulder in the attempt to ensure that human history would continue on the path of progress. They may have promised that history would continue, but the costs of doing so would continue to remain high.

For some, including the Harvard sociologist Carle C. Zimmerman, the family provided a bulwark against social and political chaos, a bulwark that was also key to the functioning of civilization itself. In his unsubtly titled *Family and Civilization*, Zimmerman outlines the deep connections between the family and the rise and fall of nations and civilizations. As sweeping in its scope as *Modern Woman*, the book attempts to find in the deep complexities of historical change and fates of the empires of the past a fundamental relation between family structure and social stability. He argues that the decline and collapse of the great civilizations—including ancient Rome—was connected to the decline in the family. As a result, he would insist in the conclusion to the volume that to prevent a similar collapse from visiting the United States, it would be necessary to both grasp and act upon the fundamental causal relationship between the family and the state.

Hollywood made sure to do its own part in the postwar effort of containment of female sexuality. May demonstrates the extent to which the studios took pains to portray their stars as conforming to this new imperative. The glamorous stars of the period were consistently shown in studio publicity—and fan discourse—as being happy homemakers (60-67). Yet this suggestion that these women managed to straddle and successfully negotiate the fraught boundary between the successful career woman and the domestic goddess often evoked the very contradictions that it sought to contain. After all, though these women were shown as domestic goddesses, they were also, first and foremost, career women.

Another equally powerful discourse suggested that women should engage in spending on objects for the home, doing their part to aid in the creation of what Lizabeth Cohen has termed the “consumer’s republic,” in which the way to happiness and societal stability lay with the purchasing of goods. Of course, part of this also had to do with the bomb, which “produced a ‘collapsed sense of temporality,’ an apocalyptic consciousness that fed the hyperactive consumer market” (Breines 7). This dynamic suggested that, if one kept on consuming, the factories and plants would continue producing, and thus the future could be assured. However, the suburban home—with all its refrigerators, television sets, and appliances—could just as easily become just another prison for the self (May 173-178).

Nevertheless, the years after World War II were a time of almost unprecedented visual and sensual bounty. The postwar era, Karal Ann Marling observes in *As Seen on TV*, was a period obsessed with the outsides of things, marked by a “scrupulous, pleasurable regard for both shape and surface.” There was a repeated emphasis on an almost “too-muchness” of visual and textural detail, an aesthetic that would influence almost every aspect of the postwar consumer world. While the consumer impulse might be a burden, it could also yield some surprising avenues of escape from the restrictions and anxieties of the postwar years (14-15).

This was also the period in which color took on an even greater role in almost every area of American life and, as Regina Lee Blaszczyk puts it, the United States underwent a color revolution. Color exploded onto the consciousness of American consumers, from cars, to phones, to kitchen appliances. This consumer culture appealed to Americans’ “chromatic yearnings,” and “whetted their appetites for more and better colors” in the new era of peace (292-294). Nowhere was this more evident in the “chromophilia of U.S. advertising” (Grisard 84). Advertising consultants of the period were convinced that color was essentially gendered (women were

assumed to be more responsive to it than men) and thus appealed far more to emotion than to reason. Color was associated with the primal, the sensational; far from merely a superficial addition, color could actually exert a physical force on the consumer, “producing desires and a need to act on them” (Grisard 82-83).<sup>6</sup>

The world of fashion in particular provided opportunities for women to encounter their bodies in new and exciting ways. The advent of Christian Dior’s New Look in 1947 marked a turning point in women’s fashion, creating a new relationship between the female body and the clothing that accompanied it. Many took issue with the designs’ controlling of the former, while others critiqued the designs for their waste, particularly for those who could still clearly remember the sort of rationing that took place in the war years (Marling 10-49). Marling, however, suggests that the new fashion exuded a palpable sense of optimism: “if its [the female body’s] shape could be changed, so could the human condition or, at the very least, the life of the lady in the son-of-Dior suit” (15). Further, such consumption of fashion could produce a “new persona, primal and highly individualized” (17).

Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, in their edited collection on the use of fashion in film, astutely argue that the excesses of costume in Hollywood frequently express a utopian sensibility, a potential avenue of resistance to the drudgery and exploitation of modern life and capitalist society. As Gaines usefully points out in her introduction to that volume, ostentatious displays of costume of this sort can “divert [...] attention from the story itself” (19). Later, she argues that the rich textures of costume excess capture the camera, producing a different set of meanings or, more frightening still, a sense of no meaning at all, evoking the strange and the inexplicable (208-2011). In other words, costume can express visually that which lies beyond the ability of mere language or narrative to convey.

The epic taps into the conflicting sensibilities of the postwar era: a desire *for* desire, a mentality of consumption as a societal good, and the split consciousness regarding female desire and female agency. Rather than being channeled into the service of hetero-reproductivity, the desires of the women of these early epics resists domestic ideology. And, because female desire (and female desirability) became associated with the all-consuming, obliterating power of the bomb, it also became a means by which the termination of history represented by that destruction could be pleurably encountered. Drawing on this perilous desire and recognizing the emotional draw of color in the broader consumer culture, the epic paints antiquity as a space of utopian fantasy, inviting an indulgence in the lushness of the present and a loss of self through the conjoining of death and desire in explosive Technicolor spectacle.

#### The Cold War Queer

While women were encouraged to find a new measure of satisfaction in the domestic sphere and in the consumption of material goods, men also faced several social pressures. While the noteworthy works emphasizing the plight of the modern male—works like William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) and Robert Lidner's *Must You Conform?* (1956)—were still to come, there was already in the immediate postwar period a sense among many American thinkers that American masculinity had been imperiled not only by the destructive impact of the war but also by the women in their lives and by a crushing sense of social responsibility. Works like Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (published in 1943) had already set the stage for a discourse that would emphasize the fallibility of American masculinity, particularly its susceptibility to the influence of smothering women. Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Vital Center* took vicious aim at the weakness of various types of men, all in the service of suggesting that the

right type of American male might just be able to stave off the destruction that awaited and pave the way for a more optimistic American future. Only through a reclamation of an essential sense of individual subjectivity could the modern man maintain his sense of psychic credibility.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the shift from a producer/entrepreneurial basis for hegemonic masculinity to a consumerist one had significant consequences for how men understood themselves and their relationship to the economy. Not only were men expected to be enmeshed within the gears of an increasingly corporate America, but they were also expected to contribute to the purchasing boom by ensuring that their spouses and children were appropriately provided for. Masculinity increasingly became a burden that was leaching the vitality from American men (Corber *Homosexuality* 1-59).

Anxiety about the role of men and the pressure to conform dovetailed with unease about homosexuality. World War II had loosened up the boundaries of the small town, introducing a generation of men and women to a world of same-sex desire that they had never known existed. Further, as Allan Berubé notes in his landmark study *Coming out Under Fire*, for all that the military attempted to exclude gay men from its ranks, it ultimately did a great deal to foster a collective sense of identity and camaraderie: “the massive mobilization for World War II relaxed the social constraints of peacetime that had kept gay men and women unaware of themselves and each other, ‘bringing out’ many in the process. Gathered together in military camps, they often came to terms with their sexual desires, fell in love, made friends with other gay people, and began to name and talk about who they were” (6).

Just as women were given a taste of independence and proved reluctant to return complacently to their housewife roles after the war, some homosexual men and women resisted the forces that quickly mobilized in the postwar world to pathologize them and rendered



them a threat to the “normal” social order. Historian John D’Emilio has written that “the transformations induced by the war added up to more than the sum of the individual lives involved. Homosexuals and lesbians in association with one another created institutions that bolstered their identity.” He points out that even relatively small cities across the country had at least one gay bar. The bar served as a crucial site for the articulation of a collective gay identity, as it provided a space in which queer people could encounter one another (*Sexual Politics* 30-34).

In the postwar period, as Steven Cohan has demonstrated, the former understanding that sexuality and gender were detached gradually gave way to a new model, one in which one’s gendered comportment became the key to reading one’s sexuality. Any sort of male behavior that did not adhere to the increasingly hegemonic norms of middle-class masculinity would mark one as deviant. Thus, the opprobrium frequently heaped upon the figure of the sissy, who refused to discipline himself and adhere to the appropriate standards of male behavior became both commonplace and expected, even among homosexual men (*Incongruous* 159-164). At the same time, there also emerged a realization that, because sexuality became something of a performance, it was theoretically possible for those who were secretly homosexual to nevertheless adopt the external trappings of normative male behavior and thus obscure their “true” nature. As a result, Robert Corber has documented, it became necessary for the government, caught up amid an environment that had already begun to equate communist behavior with homosexuality, to adhere to and promulgate a medical model of same-sex desire. According to the medical practitioners that they consulted, not only were those homosexuals who masqueraded as normal men and women as diseased as their more obviously gender-inverted

companions, they were even *more* disordered and, just as importantly, a graver security risk because of that (*In the Name* 61-69).

This fundamental instability in the relationship between male homosexuality and male gender behavior was brought into even sharper focus when the work of Alfred Kinsey became public. Even though there was already a nascent queer consciousness taking shape in the postwar landscape, when the zoologist Alfred Kinsey published his first volume on human sexuality in 1948, this volume on men landed on the cultural scene like a bombshell. A small sampling of the findings reveal just how many Americans had wandered away from the paths of socially acceptable behavior. For one thing, Kinsey suggested that male sexuality was not a fixed, static aspect of human identity and behavior but was instead subject to change over a person's lifetime. The first volume showed that a substantial number of American men had engaged in some form of homosexual encounter: 50% had reacted with some measure of sexual attraction to a person of the same sex, while 37% had had at least one homosexual experience postadolescence (Cuordileone 83). While some of Kinsey's findings, as well as his methodology, were challenged by those in the scientific community, what is important for my purposes is that the findings received such widespread dissemination that they inaugurated a radical shift in how American society at large understood sexuality, for it was far more porous than had been previously imagined. Perhaps even more sinisterly, the reports also revealed a larger percentage of homosexuals in US society than anyone had believed possible.

While some lauded Kinsey's report, others saw there the beginning of a downward spiral in the stability of American society that needed to be arrested and condemned in the strongest possible terms. *Life* magazine took a hard line against his work, condemning it as "an assault on the family as the basic unity of society, a negation of moral law, and a celebration of

licentiousness” (qtd. in Reumann 25). Henry Pitney Van Dusen, the head of Union Theological Seminary, argued that what was on display was “a prevailing degradation in American morality approximating the worst decadence of the Roman Empire. The most disturbing thing is the absence of a spontaneous ethical revulsion from the premises of the stability and the inability of the part of many readers to put their fingers on the falsity of its premises [...] the presuppositions of the Kinsey Report are strictly animalistic” (qtd. in Halberstam 280). Van Dusen, like Zimmerman, reaches back to antiquity, particularly the Roman Empire, to argue that the contemporary world finds itself on the brink of a similar moral and ethical abyss. He clearly hoped that his readers would draw the logical connection between social collapse and indulgence in sexuality.

As the 1940s rolled into the 1950s, it became clearer that queer desire was an issue for both society and the state, particularly as a potent strand of psychoanalysis began to frame homosexuality as a flight from masculinity and the social responsibilities with which it was associated. This belief was expressed, for example, in John McPartland’s 1947 *Sex in Our Changing World*, who provocatively stated: “sterile, sensual, urbane, and tragic, the homosexual has always appeared to keen over a dying society” (qtd. in Reumann 189).<sup>8</sup> There was also a slippage between the communist subversive and the homosexual, as the two figures began to blur into each other in what Corber describes as “the politicization of same-sex eroticism (*In the Name* 9-10). It was not just that the homosexual was a deviant; he was also a threat to national security and thus potentially destructive to the well-being of the country. The period saw a truly frightening outburst of anti-homosexual panic, with notable purges of the government taking place. Homosexuals, like the communists with whom they were associated, were a national

security threat and had to be expelled from all the inner workings of the government and the body politic.

Despite the best efforts to expel homosexual men and women from all aspects of the government—and despite the psychoanalytical apparatus designed to pathologize them—the period also witnessed an emergent gay rights movement. The Mattachine Society was founded in 1950 and the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955, and the work of gay writers such as Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) gained widespread national attention. Furthermore, because of the marshaling of the hegemonic forces of the state and society, gay men and lesbians developed a “collective conscious of oppression” (D’Emilio, “Homosexual Menace” 237). At the same time, these forms of oppression also forced queer people to internalize this negativity and come to embody the stereotypes by and through which contemporary society understood and categorized them (D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics* 53).

Like the way that female desire came to be associated with the destructive power of the bomb and had to thus be disciplined through domestic ideology, queer sexual desire posed a threat that must be exposed and expunged through the ideology of national security and containment. Despite the era’s best efforts to police this potentially aberrant and destructive desire, these attempts suggested that queerness was both powerful and seductive. If it were not, what would be the pointing of attempting to exclude it in such overwrought terms? The queer came to represent, in Vito Russo’s words, “the dark side of the American dream” (63). The queer characters that emerge in so many of the films of this period—from the murderous villains of Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951) to the duplicitous Eve and Addison of *All About Eve* (1950)—can thus be understood as an expression of resistance to the oppressiveness of domestic ideology, a point of tension that the films themselves offer as a

source of fraught pleasure. While the epic seems to condemn the h(y)storical queer, the fact that it brings such queerness to life in the spectacular hues of Technicolor encourages an embrace of a rapturously, destructively queer experience of the ancient world.

### The Subversive, Sensual Pleasures of Color

While the postwar period was obsessed with the pleasures and desires of color, the presence of it in the cinema had a troubled, and often deeply conflicted, history. As Jonathan Yumibe demonstrates in his book *Moving Color*, early film practitioners, critics, and others remained concerned with the fact that color threatened distraction from the moral uplift that films were supposed to provide, and “the attempt to subdue color during this period [...] registers a genuine alarm at the sensual effect of color on the spectator.” He goes on to suggest that this stems from the fact that color, both in its early days and in later developments, was associated with the lowbrow, the vulgar, and the unclean. What’s more, it was also associated with the trappings of sex and the body rather than with spiritual or aesthetic transcendence. As a result, it had to be “controlled, uplifted, repressed” (9-11).<sup>9</sup>

The principle that color should remain subservient to and in the service of narrative—and *not* a distraction from it—would prove remarkably long-lived in the history of Hollywood filmmaking. When Technicolor emerged as a dominant color process in Hollywood, its practitioners went out of their way to ensure that those who used it understood the necessity of policing it. First introduced into Hollywood feature filmmaking with the film *Becky Sharp* (1935), Technicolor became increasingly popular in the making of films that emphasized escapism, and the use of the process fell largely under the direction of Natalie Kalmus, the ex-

wife of the company's founder. She became an auteur because of her articulation of what she termed a "color consciousness."

In a 1935 address to the Technicians Branch of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Kalmus argued: "we must study color harmony, the appropriateness of color to certain situations, the appeal of color to the emotions. Above all, we must take more interest in the colorful beauties that lie about us—the iridescent blue brilliance of the butterfly's wing, the subtle tones of a field of grain, the violet shadows of the desert, the sunset's reflection in the ocean" (25). Throughout her lengthy address, Kalmus relies again and again on sensual descriptions to convey the importance of color to the moving image and to the power of film to tell a story that is at once compelling and moving. Though she does not say so explicitly, she acknowledges that color appeals not just to the *eye*, but also to the other senses, particularly touch. When, for example, she refers to the iridescence of the butterfly's wing, she draws attention to the fact that color can uniquely capture the subtle flicker of texture. Kalmus also registers the idea that color has an expressive power that goes beyond straightforward denotative meanings.

It is no accident that Technicolor became associated with genres that highlight the tactility of the film surface, inviting a feeling of contact between the body of the spectator and the body of the film. In a recent discussion of the relationship between subjectivity and color in cinema, Barbara Flueckiger argues that, "colors address the senses directly. As a result, colors trigger unmediated bodily and sensorial responses of spectators." She goes on to say that, in a film like Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, the color cinematography of the film captures the sense of imprisonment the heroine Carey feels because of the cold, hard, metal surfaces of her bourgeois environment, which neatly contrasts with the warmer, more natural textures

associated with Ron the gardener (210-225). I would add that it is only when she embraces this earthier, more visceral sense of life outside of the bonds of postwar domesticity that she finds emotional and sexual fulfilment. The sense of texture and touch that color is uniquely primed to provide heightens Carey's feeling of freedom and elation as she embraces this new world, one of slightly rough, red flannel; grainy wood; and homey pottery. The relative softness of these fabrics has replaced the unfeeling hardness of the products of crass postwar commercialism.

Because color, particularly in the 1940s and early 1950s, was typically used in genres that emphasized the spectacular—musicals, melodramas, and costume dramas—it occupied a vexed relationship with cinematic realism. Steve Neale argues that the central problem of color is “the contradiction between colour as an index of realism and color as a mark of fantasy, as an element capable, therefore, of disrupting or distracting from the very realism it is otherwise held to inscribe” (147). As a genre that seems to have a foot in both worlds—draped in the aura of historical authenticity while appealing to the utopian sensibility of Hollywood film—the epic creates an antiquity that is a place of chaotic colors and desires, as resistant to the disciplinary mechanisms of narrative as it is to the demands of authenticity. It is for this reason, I argue, that so many of the epic films discussed in this chapter do not use color in the service of making the ancient world look realistic, but instead as a utopian solution to the problems and contradictions of the postwar world, allowing for a temporary forgetting of the burdens of historical awareness.<sup>10</sup>

It is only recently that the role of color in the epic film has received sustained attention from film scholars, and Robert Burgoyne suggests that while it often remains buried within the linear order of narrative, it frequently erupts to disturb the dominant meanings associated with the genre: the hero's journey, the foundation of a people, the fulfillment of a quest. Color

“asserts a kind of alternative vision of history, centered on the triumph of emotion and desire, a message conveyed in sensual form (96). In focusing on this desire and in drawing attention to what he calls the “expressive, primal dimensions of epic form,” Burgoyne usefully demonstrates the extent to which color operates as the sexual unconscious of the epic film (102). It expresses the unsettling power of desire to disrupt the forward movement of narrative time, providing an axis of cinematic experience that encourages an embrace of the sensual present.

Building on Burgoyne’s work, I argue that color registers the period’s anxieties about the troubled relationship among past, present, and future, and the epic provides a solution in the form of an abandonment in the mingled joy and terror of what I call “chromatic desire.” That is to say, color in the epic films I discuss invites the spectator to lose themselves in the midst of the desire that suffuses the narrative, the fiercely unsettling “now” that exists in the fraught space between the brutality of sadism (the threat of divine punishment) and masochism (the guilty indulgence in the illicit and the welcoming of that retribution). This is a subversive experience of time, a past that is also a perpetual present. When the inevitable punishment arrives, it too provides a perverse gratification in the form of an eruption of primal, visceral, and spectacular violence, the sublime fulfilment promised by the end.

*Samson and Delilah*, as the inaugural entry in the postwar cycle and as the product of a director who made use of excessive spectacle a hallmark of his style, certainly brings the epic to prominence through a startlingly brash use of Technicolor in a phantasmagoria of self-destructive pleasure. Although Henry Koster’s *David and Bathsheba* has more in common with the social problem films that Twentieth Century-Fox was in the business of producing at the time, its relatively subdued color palette nevertheless betrays the power of erotic desire in its moments of chromatic richness, with Technicolor offering an opportunity to experience the



deadly pleasures of desire outside the bounds of its heroic, redemptive narrative. Color in this film registers the fundamental disturbance that desire poses to the reunion of its hero with his God. Furthermore, the anticlimactic endings that punctuate these films betray not only their ambivalence about the viability of a reproductive human future—the socially sanctioned purpose of heterosexual desire—but also their greater interest in the perpetual present offered by that desire. It is the deliriously queer Nero of *Quo Vadis*, however, who offers up the purest form of resistance to the reproductive narrative; clad in resplendent Technicolor hues and committed to an embrace of the sensually chromatic world, he represents an immersion in the destructively pleasurable experience of queer time.

“The Anachronistic Savagery of Analine Dyes” in *Samson and Delilah*

At the level of narrative, *Samson and Delilah* portrays a world fundamentally split along two poles: on the one exists the world of political enslavement, debauchery, and sensual indulgence and on the other are the forces of freedom, transcendence, and enlightenment. The film clearly intends for the latter to dominate the former, so that Samson’s epic heroic destiny intertwines with the values of responsibility and faith in the transcendent power of God and the Law. However, color intervenes in this repressive regime. By associating the negative terms of the binary with the utopian spectacularity of Technicolor aesthetics, the film offers transgression as an escape from the prison of duty and a drive toward the always-uncertain future. Color instead opens up a field of desire predicated on the pursuit of endless pleasure, associated with the dangerous tide of carnal emotion and barbarism. Though the film punishes this transgression with the destruction of the Temple of Dagon at its climax, this frenzied display of color and

violence weds a utopian sensibility to a loss of self, offering a form of *jouissance* which twines together the desire for an escape from time with the absolute, sublime pleasure of death.

As DeMille recounts in his autobiography, when he pitched the story to the studio heads at Paramount, he argued that it was fundamentally a boy meets girl story (and what a boy and what a girl, he supposedly added). He then showed them images of Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr, the visual embodiments of maleness and femaleness in the common imagination. His Samson and Delilah were not to be mere icons, divorced from material realities as objects of detached devotion, but flesh and blood human beings with *desires*. DeMille knew the allure in his ability to “translate the Bible’s glorious English into the crudest vernacular,” as he explains. Such an approach “shocks, but it makes real” (399-400).

Writing in *Boxoffice*, the critic Ivan Spear observed that the film provided everything that a postwar audience could want: “spectacle, sex, action, religion, suspense, color,” while other critics recognized that the anxieties of the age found expression in *Samson and Delilah*’s color design (35). George Barbarow, writing in *The Hudson Review*, noted that “the visualization of the legendary feats, presented in harsh, glaring Technicolor are infused with horrendous magnificence [...]” He would go on to note that this color design is in “harmony with the spirit of the Old Testament, pregnant with *wrath* and saturated with *blood*” (597 emphasis in original). Likewise, in the suggestively titled “The Siegfried of Sex,” Simon Harcourt-Smith argued that DeMille recognized that “the entertainment business is in the main a by-product of the sexual impulse” (411). He then describes the film’s expression of the “rising taste for sadism of our dying society” and “the anachronistic savagery of analine dyes,” concluding in part by noting that the film “does hold moments of great excitement and terror” (412-424).

These critics grudgingly acknowledge that DeMille, the Hollywood veteran, still understood the contemporary cultural climate. Both appreciate the pleasure to be found in pain—note in particular Harcourt-Smith’s concern for the sadism of a dying society, a comment reminiscent of concerns over the sexual anomie of the atomic age. Both also suggest that the color cinematography conveys not just the brightness of utopia but the darker and more violent tendencies in the collective psyche, as when Barbarow draws attention, with apparent relish, to the wrath and blood associated with the Old Testament and when Harcourt-Smith expresses (possibly feigned) disgust with the savagery associated with the offensively anachronistic, brazen, hyper-saturated hues of Technicolor. DeMille may not have been subtle in his style—Harcourt-Smith calls it “repellant, monstrous, blatant perhaps”—but he did know how to use spectacle to overwhelm his audience, evoking terrified pleasure at the dangers of the ancient biblical world (410).

Based on the narrative from the Book of Judges and on a little-known novel called *Judge and Fool*, *Samson and Delilah* follows the Hebrew leader Samson (Victor Mature) as his fate gradually interweaves with the Philistine noblewoman Delilah (Hedy Lamarr) and her sister Semadar (Angela Lansbury). After Samson’s actions inadvertently result in the death of Semadar, Delilah conspires with the cunning Saran of the Philistines (George Sanders) to bring about the capture and eventual enslavement of the man who rejected her love. While Samson is robbed of his strength through Delilah’s cunning and the cutting of his hair, he ultimately recovers it and brings about the destruction of the Temple of Dagon and the Philistine nobility who have gathered to watch his ultimate humiliation. The film ends with a coda in which the Hebrew maiden Miriam and the young Saul mourn the passing of Samson into the annals of history.

The film opens with a spinning globe, a signifier of the world-historical consequences of sexual desire (Meyer 35-38). The opening sequence that follows associates saturated blue and red hues with the earth-bound heathen gods that embody humankind's darker instincts, which threaten to draw the spirit down into the mesh of fleshly enslavement. By contrast, the realm of the spirit and freedom emerges in shots of the sky and clouds, painted in pale shades of cream and orange. This opening intends the transcendent nature of God to stand in for the liberty of collective humanity, the spiritual realm mapping neatly over the political. At the same time, the film acknowledges that this "freedom" relies on a repression of the human instinct for indulgence in the profane material world. Although the voiceover attempts to control the images over which it appears—and to associate them with the carnality of evil—it cannot entirely overcome the limitations imposed by its own invisibility. It is the heathen gods who are drenched in alluring and seductive colors, the material image of the divine that the Old Testament God cannot find in this film. From the outset, the film sets up a narrative pattern—the importance of reason over barbarism, faith over idolatry, spirit over body—that it repeatedly undercuts with its own use of color.

Once DeMille's voiceover and opening narration is finished—never to appear again—the film segues into another of its structuring oppositions, that between the Philistines and their subalterns, the Danites. Whereas the Philistines are almost always associated with bright reds and brassy golds, the Danites, when they infrequently appear on-screen, remain draped in homelier hues, largely variants of brown and tan (Barbarow 597). Color here again aligns with the victors of the struggle between military might and the subdued homely values of humility, between the hardness of metal and the softer touches of fabric (*figure 13*). While the film's narrative suggests that the Philistines' cruelty is as wanton as it is destructive—as when a group

of Philistine soldiers assault an old man and the woman Miriam—it also provides the pleasure of being on the side of those who have power in this brutal, chaotic ancient world. The color scheme, bifurcated as it is along lines of power and prostration, registers an essential brutality, indulging in the barbaric pleasures of the diegetic present.



*Figure 13. The chromatic brutality of Philistine mastery.*

The subsequent scene, in which the Philistine Ahtur showcases a set of fabrics to the nobleman Tubal, highlights the allure of the tactile that the film's Technicolor aesthetics are uniquely primed to exploit. As Jonathan Yumibe explains, color cinema frequently seeks to engender a relationship with the film image, a feeling as if it can be touched, caressed, and desired (9-11).<sup>11</sup> This moment thus engenders an erotic encounter, when the film invites a feeling of exchange between the body of the spectator and the body of the film, a suspended moment of indulgence in the exquisite beauty of the ancient world: the blue translucence of the gauze, the softness of the linen, and the metallic glare of Ahtur's gold helmet.<sup>12</sup> Narrative cause-and-effect is bracketed in this moment of amorous contemplation, and the film recognizes the desires of a postwar audience to engage with the world (and the surfaces) of things, things that in this

instance have no value other than as markers of wealth and power (*figure 14*). This narratively extraneous moment lays the groundwork for precisely the enslavement to the world of pleasure and the senses that will continue to resist the film's attempts to impose sacred discipline.



*Figure 14. The haptic allure of the ancient world.*

When Delilah is introduced in the next scene, the film juxtaposes her chromatic luxury with Samson's plainness. She is garbed in vibrant, piercing red, a subdued but iridescent green, and shimmering gold, the mixture of these colors heightening her association with the destructive powers of nature and carnality, which contrasts with the drab browns and tans of Samson's homespun and the chains of the domestic that it represents.<sup>13</sup> In rendering Delilah's desires so piercingly visible, this moment is also an ironic counterpoint to the film's ostensible message about the value of freedom. Though the dominant message argues that Delilah represents the enslavement to the senses that is the opposite of political liberty, color here suggests that desire offers a realm of pleasure that is its own form of independence, one that frees the body of its obligations to God, to the Law, and to an awareness of one's role in the perpetuation of the

future. The chain of associations that the film draws between Delilah and the animal underscores this sensibility; the world of nature exists outside the bounds of the Law.

Scholars have noted the similarities between Delilah and the *femmes fatales* of postwar *film noir*, arguing that her juxtaposition with the Danite maiden Miriam mirrors that other genre's structuring opposition between destructive and homely femininity.<sup>14</sup> More than just suggesting that each of these characters represent the bifurcated logic of the postwar imaginary—and thus as objects of male fantasy—I would suggest that they each express a different relationship to time, particularly the present and the future, an expression that finds form in the film's color design. While Delilah almost invariably outfits herself in signifiers of the barbaric richness provided by Philistine mastery, Miriam almost always appears in more subdued shades, including an outfit of blue and red that has clear iconographic connections to the Virgin Mary, thus evoking her negation and her ultimate humility (Gage 130).<sup>15</sup> Delilah, full of lush, vibrant vitality, opens an escape from time in the pursuit of pleasure. Miriam, accompanied by the child Saul, represents the chains of duty, the injunction to think always of the future. While the narrative proposes that the latter is the ideal choice, the film's color design grants desire an allure that breaks free of the injunction to take up the epic hero's burden and for specifically female desire to have free rein.

Critics of the film also tend to take a psychoanalytic stance regarding Delilah and her role, arguing that as a *femme fatale* she is little more than a projection of male anxieties and that her threat can be investigated, chained, and controlled (Exum 175-236).<sup>16</sup> This understanding regards Delilah's—and other women's—desires as products of patriarchy, ultimately concluding that there is no space in classic Hollywood film for female subjectivity or agency. In doing so, however, such critics ultimately reinscribe the very anti-woman discourses they set out to

critique.<sup>17</sup> Ignored is the fact that Delilah's desire, so foregrounded at both the narrative and spectacular level, motivates the escape from the burdens of the future that is so central to the film.

This space of resistant, destructive desire can most clearly be seen in two noteworthy sequences. In the first, Delilah attends the betrothal feast between Samson and her sister Semadar. She taps a crimson rose against her lips as she contemplates bringing about the ruin of the man who spurned her, the hue of the rose standing in contrast to her blue robe and in unison with the lurid red hue of her lips. This prop suggests a latent eroticism that the film rarely brings into the open, including the flower's long association with female reproduction (particularly the vulva) (Kozlovic 28). At this point, Delilah has begun to plot and scheme against her erstwhile love interest, Lamarr's face conveying both covetous longing and bitter jealousy. Delilah becomes not just an *object* of the gaze, but also a desiring and dangerous *subject*. The film, so invested in the alluring nature of mingled desire and rage, feels *with* her in a form of emotional contagion. Desire for revenge and for sexual consummation intertwine in this pivotal moment.

In the second scene, Delilah has taken up residence in the court of the Saran (George Sanders). She appears before the Sarah and the gathered Philistine chieftains garbed in a gold gown and a ruby-red fan, scarf, and jewelry. She announces her intention to ensnare Samson and discover the source of his strength. The red pulses with vitality, jealousy, and anger, echoing the hue that is frequently associated with the Philistines and the pendant that the Saran himself wears (*figure 15*). The haptic allure of the gold gown adds a metallic luster, her costume articulating (in Burgoyne's phrasing): "a coded protest, a symbolic form of resistance" to the narrative that positions her as an entirely negative force (107). Through her visual alignment with the persistent threat of death and warfare, the film heightens the pleasurable association of Delilah



with a titanic force that cannot be so easily contained within narrative. She emerges as a distillation of the competing postwar discourses surrounding female desire—as destructive, as alluring, as obliterating—but does not resolve or channel them into a domestic ideal. Her own desire, an emotional *mélange* of lust, anger, and jealousy, provides another axis of pleasure, a feeling of what it would be like to think of satisfaction with no obligations to a larger historical destiny.



*Figure 15. Delilah’s dangerous and deadly desires radiate into the color palette of the film.*

Taking the film’s color design into account allows for an understanding of Delilah as not just a projection of male fears but also as a force akin to what Camille Paglia has defined as the chthonic, a disruptive, destructive, counterpoint to the film’s dominant masculine logic. Throughout the film Samson compares her to animals—including an adder, a wildcat, and a gutter rat—and at one moment, he bitingly tells her that “your kiss is the sting of death,” his insult rendering explicit the film’s conjoining of the pleasures of sex with the tug toward destruction.<sup>18</sup> For her part, she informs him that “if you crushed the life out of me, I’d kiss you with my dying breath,” an acknowledgment of the violence entailed in her lust, the perilously

sublime pleasure of consummated desire, and a harbinger of the doom that will ultimately sweep them both away in the film's final reel.<sup>19</sup> In some ways this conflation of desire and death is hardly surprising, given that, as I discussed above, there was a significant postwar association between sexuality and fatality, and Samson's continual pursuit of Delilah signals his recognition, even if at a subconscious level, of this essential aspect of her character. The fact that she so often dominates the color palette of the film renders this deadly sexuality as irresistible as it is dangerous.

The rich color thus acknowledges the inherently powerful, dynamic nature of female sexuality and desire. In that regard, Delilah has a great deal in common with her cinematic predecessor, the vamp, particularly in her elaborate costuming and her frequent association with the animal. As Inga Fraser has argued, the use of such costuming allows the vamp to stop time, engendering a space of fantasy in which desire to linger over the image takes precedence over narrative (180-201).<sup>20</sup> Through its constant emphasis on the texture of Delilah's costuming, *Samson and Delilah* creates a similarly fantastic space, one that was appropriate for a culture fixated on the power of fabric and fashion, rendering visible the political and social power of female desires.<sup>21</sup>

The film's most intense scenes of emotional and visual satisfaction belong to Delilah, particularly when she sets out to snare Samson by luring him to her pleasure tent in the Valley of Sorech. When he first sees her approach, the bright crimson of her tent stands in marked contrast to the barren sandy desert, again associating her with the barely-restrained violence of nature. Like her cinematic forbears (as well as some of her successors, such as the Empress Messalina in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*), Delilah's is the pursuit of the now at the expense of, and often in subversion of, the future. Even her desire to lure Samson away to Egypt and avoid the necessity

of surrendering him to the Philistines remains predicated on a wish to escape the prison of political, historical, and religious duty.

When Samson enters her tent, the screen fills with sensuous pleasure: bright blue flowers, crimson and yellow rugs, and purple cloths seem intent on seducing Samson and the observant camera. The very fabric of the film flushes with desire, showing Samson what it feels like to escape from the drabness that have already been associated with his patriarchal heroic destiny.<sup>22</sup> This sequence expresses, in ways that Samson cannot articulate even to himself, “the attraction of losing himself in love, transcending the self through the intimate knowing of the other” (Exum *Potted* 221). The screen contains a surfeit of objects and colors, inviting a loss of historical subjectivity in a wave of desire, the world of things overwhelming the injunction to obey the will of God. The fact that this God remains stubbornly invisible throughout the film heightens the seductiveness of the spectacular colors and tactile fabrics.

Samson increasingly becomes part of this chromatic landscape, his former homespun replaced by a tunic that defies easy classification (*figure 16*). Unlike the solid colors in which almost every other character appears, Samson’s robe shifts colors with his every move, blurring the boundaries between the hero and the hedonistic environment in which he has become enmeshed. For this moment in the film, Samson and Delilah can almost pretend that the outside world and all its attendant responsibilities—the pressures of the domestic and the home that afflict Samson, the political scheming of the Saran that presses in on Delilah—can be forgotten in the perpetual present of desire. As one of the “peaks of color” in the film, this moment of conspicuous spectacle hangs suspended in the midst of narrative time, an oasis from its relentless forward movement.<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 16. The fall into color.*

Of course, this suspension cannot last and Miriam, with Saul at her side, intervenes to drag Samson back into the social world of history. It is no accident that Samson's blinding comes about as he decides that he must pursue his destiny and go back to his people, though he promises that he will return for Delilah. Determined not to lose him to either his invisible God, his historical destiny as the leader of the Danites, or her romantic rival, she shears his hair and turns him over to the Philistines. After they decide to use a hot poker to blind him, color takes on an ever-more-ominous edge, the loss of historical agency reflected in both the camerawork and the color design. The shot holds steady as the orange-red poker comes ever closer, until it has obliterated almost everything around it, rendering visible the pleasurable terror of a loss of subjectivity (*figure 17*).



*Figure 17. Color obliterates subjectivity.*

After his blinding, Samson is reduced to serving as a beast of burden for his Philistine masters, forced to grind wheat for the mocking laughter of those gathered to witness his abject state. The colors that accompany his transformation from the “lion of Dan” (his former epithet) to a beast of burden are all muted grays. Samson’s physical surroundings mirror his internal blindness, the world now a shadowy world of gray, devoid of vital human vitality and desire in the service of emotionless labor. Human vivacity has been yoked to the relentless toil of production, the servant of God become a servant of his worldly masters. The colors remain muted as Delilah realizes the folly of her ways, begs Samson for forgiveness, and ultimately becomes part of his plan to enact God’s divine will upon the Philistines. Subdued, cool shades of blue and grey provide a moment of calm and reflection, before the narrative sends them both hurtling to their collective doom.

Before the spectacular destruction begins, the camera wanders over the chaotic scene at the Temple of Dagon—full of light, brilliant colors, and movement. The energetic cuts here combine with the sensual appeal of Technicolored fabric to evoke exuberant, orgiastic joy. The pressures of the narrative are momentarily forgotten, the fear of impending judgment momentarily suspended in the film’s clear indulgence in spectacle, the pleasure of the moment

fused with its inevitable punishment. This conflation of the imminence and immanence of destruction provides its own form of pleasure, precisely because the film invites an embrace of the cruel power associated with Philistine mastery, pandering to the taste for sadism perceived by Harcourt-Smith in his commentary.

The camera particularly dwells on Delilah and her lustrous, peacock-feathered gown, which shimmers with piercing blues and greens. As with the vamps of early cinema with whom she shares a visual iconography, Delilah freezes the narrative in an exquisite moment of erotic contemplation, a suspension of time before the inevitable cataclysm comes crashing down.<sup>24</sup> The gown, in all its sumptuous excess, exists in that space of the strange and inexplicable that Gaines describes, a marker of her slippery nature and her complicity in Samson's plan to destroy the temple. It also marks a moment of fantasy, an expression of the period's own obsession with the power of costume to express inner, darker yearnings, the conjoining of desire with death that was such a central part of the postwar conflation of sexuality and climactic annihilation (*figures 18 and 19*).





*Figures 18 and 19. Delilah shares a visual iconography with the vamp of early cinema.*

Yet the narrative moves forward, and the spectacle of malice and cruelty grows more frenzied, with the little people's torment of Samson and the cheering spectators embodying the seething power of life, heedless of the destruction about to descend upon them. Once again, the film invests in the desires of the present, while also providing the uneasy pleasure of inevitable doom. Barbarow refers to the "terrifying pathos" of this sequence, arguing that this moment has not simply "been placed on the screen in order to be enjoyed by the sadists for its own sake" (597). Certainly, there is something deeply wrenching about this sequence, as Samson blindly attempts to fulfill his divine purpose, but the numerous shots from the perspective of the diegetic spectators suggests something more complex than Barbarow acknowledges. The film here engenders a feeling of complicity, a stroking of the libido before the punishment dictated by the Law of God comes crashing down.

This libido-stroking continues when Delilah juxtaposes her desires for Samson to those of Miriam. Whereas Delilah loves Samson for his presence as a man, Miriam loves him for what he represents in terms of the social order, i.e. as a father, husband, and ultimately a leader for the Danites. In other words, Delilah's is a desire that is a fulfillment in, of, and for itself, expressed through the excess of color and costume. Miriam's is one that represents the imprisonment of

historical duty and the relentless march toward the future, her darker, drabber garb once again signifying her self-abnegation. When Delilah tells Miriam that she would rather see him dead than in her arms, she repudiates the Danite's vision of a future for Samson, instead indulging in Samson's desire for the pleasurable release of death. It remains unclear whether she refuses Miriam's request for mercy out of a desire to aid Samson in his effort to bring down the temple, whether she means what she says or, more sinister perhaps, whether it is some combination of the two. Her willingness to participate in Samson's drive to destroy the temple is thus rendered ambiguous, and while it is true (as many commentators argue) that her decision to do so seems to signify her redemption, I would argue that it is also possible that she does so out of a recognition that it is only through death that she will find the ultimate fulfillment of her desire for Samson. Her last look at him mingles awe, fear, and desire at his strength and at the ruin that has descended upon them all.

The cataclysm that is the film's climax results from the film's twining together of desire with humanity's relentless desire to destroy itself. This final orgiastic sequence, in all its vibrant color and vertiginous movement, represents a moment when the hero is granted the absolute oblivion that is the consummation of the intertwining of desire with death. Samson's supplication to God to "Now let me die with my enemies" signifies his desire to escape from the prison of his historical destiny—and from time itself—in this moment of orgasmic destruction. The camera's persistent lingering on the dead and dying bodies of the Philistines (still brightly garbed, the Technicolor saturation adding a further layer of lurid fascination to the spectacle) highlights the mingled yearning for and fear of extinction.

In his *Boxoffice* review, Ivan Spear wrote that: "So exciting and stirring is this climax that spectators may momentarily forget that it was preceded by several scenes of almost comparable



magnitude” (35). His comments echo those of the trailer for the film, which enjoin the spectator to “SEE” the “shattering thrills,” “earth shaking excitement,” and “savage drama” of the film’s dramatic conclusion. Both review and trailer reveal the extent to which the Temple of Dagon sequence stands as the center of the film, a pivotal moment of *jouissance* in which past, present, and even future are forgotten, obliterated in the “shattering” and “savage” drama of this cataclysm. The sheer magnitude, as Spear intimates, is enough to suspend the spectator in the mist of this instant of apocalyptic destruction, banishing everything that has come before or after it.

The unsettling, shattering pleasures of this sequence render the final scene of the film—a brief coda in which Miriam and Saul discuss whether Samson will be remembered throughout the ages—unsatisfying. Though this ending seeks to provide some sort of redemptive meaning to the destructive pleasures in which the film has indulged, it can never completely provide the closure it offers. As Thomas Elsaesser has suggested of the postwar melodrama, the narrative “more often records the failure of the protagonist to act in a way that could shape events and influence the emotional environment, let alone change the stifling milieu. The world is closed, and the characters are acted upon. Melodrama confers upon them a negative identity through suffering, and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment generally end in resignation [...]” (524). I would extend Elsaesser’s point to the epic. The genre is both highly melodramatic in terms of its affects and fails to contain the very terrifying history that it has so vibrantly brought into existence.<sup>25</sup> The fact that neither Samson nor Delilah survives their own story suggests the futility of their actions in the face of the driving forces to which they succumb. They have pursued desire to its ultimate end.

The potent color design, so spectacularly on display at the end of *Samson and Delilah*, defies the coherence and explanatory power offered by narrative. The finale offers a feeling of escape from the mesh of linear, historical time into the lush, vibrant world of color, spectacle, and sex.<sup>26</sup> The pleasure that accompanies this moment of destruction thus stems from a desire for the final escape from the responsibilities of history, particularly as these manifest as a relentless drive toward an uncertain future. By using color to so inflame and express desire, the film engenders a feeling of complicity in this quest for oblivion outside the bounds of historical meaning. The desire for an absolute ending is too strong to resist.

The world that emerges from the ending of *Samson and Delilah* ultimately remains unredeemed by the sacrifices that the two title characters have made. The Philistines of Gaza have been destroyed, but the film remains silent on what the status of the Danites will be. Will they be freed at last from the yoke of their masters? Will they be able to continue establishing their own state, now that one of their foremost leaders has been destroyed? The film ultimately leaves these questions unanswered—there are no scenes proclaiming the freedom of the people of Israel, no scenes of reconciliation that might render Samson’s sacrifice more strongly akin to that of Christ—precisely because the answers remain secondary to the film’s primary pleasures. As DeMille knew quite well, it mattered less whether the political questions were resolved; instead, the pleasure lies in its stimulation of the deadly desires encoded into the human experience of desire.

#### Death-in-Desire in *David and Bathsheba*

*Samson and Delilah* would become the top box office attraction of 1949, and the other studios took note. It was not long before both MGM and Fox had their own epic films in

production. While the former set about adapting the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Christian-Roman novel *Quo Vadis*, the latter opted to continue with DeMille's attention to the romantic entanglements of an Old Testament patriarch. Though more restrained in its use of color, *David and Bathsheba* nevertheless registers the profound uncertainties afflicting midcentury American masculinity. It simmers beneath the surface of that narrative, an unsettling reminder of the unstable nature of desire. Throughout the film, however, color periodically erupts, disrupting the heroic redemptive narrative that continues to move David toward a reunion with the God that has abandoned him. While it can be a force that liberates the male from political and social responsibility—and while it can soothe the trauma of the brutality of the past—it remains irrevocably intertwined with punishment and death. Color also expresses David's desires not just for Bathsheba, but for an escape from the weight of his past and the injunctions of the future. It ultimately suffuses the fabric of the film to such an extent that the ending, which sees David reconciled with God after his extramarital affair with Bathsheba, remains tinged with the dangers of death-in-desire, the palette a harbinger of the uncertain future to come.

Starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward in the title roles, the film follows their relationship as it takes shape and gradually threatens to tear apart the very fabric of Israelite society. After David spies the already-married Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop, he decides that he must have her at any cost, and this desire ultimately leads to his decision to plan the death of Bathsheba's lawful husband, Uriah the Hittite. Punished and abandoned by God and the prophet Nathan (Raymond Massey), David watches as both his personal and political fortunes crumble around him; it is only when he abases himself before his Father that he, and Bathsheba, are at last granted absolution and the world is (seemingly) restored to balance.

At the beginning of the film, David clearly bears traumatic wounds from the past, and his relationship to God—and the kingship that is its earthly manifestation—weighs on him. Having just returned from a battle against the Ammorites, he is glad to be in the field again, as it reminds him of his essential humanity. The relentless march of time and the pressures of kingship, which require him always to think of the future of his people and their political and social well-being, have rendered David an adult and begun to drain him of the innocence, youth, and vitality that once characterized his life in as a shepherd. The color scheme of these early scenes is remarkably muted, and the inside of David's tent is presented in drab browns. The subdued lighting draws attention to the film's allegiance with a social problem film aesthetic while also demonstrating the extent to which David's office as king *and* general is a prison, a world devoid of compassion and human warmth. He may have fulfilled the historical destiny that God had ordained for him, but this has extracted an immense physical and emotional price. Unsurprisingly, he continues to put his life in danger; only through feats of action can he hope to regain a measure of the human vitality that he once possessed.

This sense of imprisonment comes into sharper focus once the setting shifts to the palace, for the trappings of civilization—necessary for the emergent kingdom of Israel—keep him enmeshed in the slavery of his role as leader of his people. The color scheme in these early moments is subdued, the drab gray walls of the palace indicating the extent to which David's life remains devoid of warmth, love, and even humanity. His subjectivity remains structured by a sense of alienation and strife, an unfortunate byproduct of his time in war, his service to God, and his role as the leader of his people. Even his relationship with his wife Michal, daughter of David's predecessor Saul, which should provide him with the means of attaining personal (and political) fulfillment, remains tainted by her growing antipathy toward him as well as her

scheming with their son. Her deep green gown expresses the sinister jealousy and emotional rottenness at the heart of David's political life, the ties of the past reaching out to snare him.

When David emerges onto the balcony after a fraught exchange with Michal—in which she impugns his masculinity and his right to the kingship—the cool blues offer a respite from the pressures of court and kingdom that have drained his vitality. The blue marks a point at which he can escape the alienation that he encounters in his time enmeshed in the trials of his present life. When he sees Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop, he envisions an opportunity to escape from his ennui. The later revelation that she knew that he was looking at her acts as a reclamation of female sexuality and an indication of her own awareness that sexual desire is most powerful when it occurs outside the strict bounds of the Law. However, they both recognize, even if only on a subliminal level, that the pursuit of such desire inevitably entails punishment, and the film remains caught amid the competing impulses for both sadism and masochism, the desire to see the lovers punished and the drive to see them pursue their consummation.

While scholars remain divided about whether Bathsheba's confession marks a departure in the functioning of subjectivity and spectatorship (both male and female) within the film, I argue that the chromatic aesthetics evoke a passionate *sharing* of bodily sensations, a meshing of desire that evades, rather than adheres to, the typical binary structure that positions men as active and women as passive.<sup>27</sup> In this scene, it is Hayward's chestnut locks that capture the camera's attention, along with the ever-so-slightly subdued red of the screen that tastefully keeps her full body out of view of the camera.<sup>28</sup> As with *Samson and Delilah*, the power of Bathsheba's sensual sexuality radiates outward onto the color palette that surrounds her, suffusing the very fabric of the film.

Both David and Bathsheba desire a physical and sexual relationship that is more fulfilling than those that have been sanctioned by the state and society which binds them. The primary blues and reds that saturate the scene provide the characters an escape from the bounds of the Law and of historical responsibility—the injunction to remember the past and to think and plan for the future—and to embrace instead the pulsing vitality of life in the present. They signify the elemental emotions of desire and love, and they bear out David’s remark to Bathsheba that “We Hebrews are of the desert. We breathe its wind, and our blood runs hot with it. Our emotions are fierce, like the desert wind. We worship our God fiercely. We love fiercely. We feel sorrow fiercely.” The film associates desire with vivacity, with a passion that cannot, and should not, be easily contained within the bounds of Mosaic law. There is an immediacy to this feeling, and film emerges as a site where the rules governing sexual behavior can be broken, for they can never fully keep the libidinal forces of human sexuality entirely in check.

Given the centrality of unrestricted desire to the relationship between David and Bathsheba, it is no accident that one of the centerpieces of their budding romance shows the two of them out in the fields that David once called home. The color palette is not as bright as when David first saw Bathsheba, but the mixture of browns and greens implies ripeness and a different kind of escape from the prison of duty, via a return to pastoral simplicity. For David, it also marks a return to his youth and to the closeness to God that he once possessed, a closeness marked by an awareness of the cycle of life and an emotional transparency that has slowly been leached away by his sense of duty and his political obligations. As he says in response to her concern about the shepherd-boy observing their lovemaking, “Shepherd boys learn early about life [...] I knew everything there was to know about life...and death.” David is aware of the specter of mortality that remains bound up with the reproductive futurity alluded to by the film’s

soft colors, the budding cherry trees, and even the lamb that makes a small yet symbolic appearance. Even amid the riot of life that is the fertile pastoral, there lurks the fact that death, inescapable, inexorable, is a necessary part of the individual life and of the nation-state itself.

This specter becomes increasingly prominent in the film's color palette; red particularly binds the life-giving power of desire with the pursuit of death.<sup>29</sup> When, for example, David and Bathsheba return from their sojourn in the countryside, they see an adulteress about to be stoned by the angry people of Jerusalem, and her crimson cloak and the blood that smears her face after she is struck by the first rock echoes and emphasizes Bathsheba's own red hair. The startling eruption of bright color into the scene forces an encounter with the reality that adulterous desire, as fulfilling as it can be, also engenders an ecstatic shudder of brutal, violent death. In staging this sequence so that it follows David and Bathsheba's illicit lovemaking in the countryside, the film makes clear that death is the wages of love outside the bounds of the law, and the visual echoing of adulteress's cloak and Bathsheba's hair underscores their association. The promotional materials for the film—particularly the trailer—tend to conflate the stoning of the adulteress with Bathsheba herself.

Later, as David tries to tempt Uriah into indulging in the pleasures of the flesh so as to cover up Bathsheba's pregnancy, he invites a dancer to perform in the royal court, the too-bright red of her attire and the rug on which she performs seems to radiate outward from the screen, a reminder not only of the dangerous nature of sexual desire but also another visual echo of the adulteress and of Bathsheba herself. The fact that Uriah refuses to give in to this attempt to seduce him highlights his inflexibility and his lack of humanity; rather than rendering him sympathetic, it makes him even more inhuman. He simply cannot bring himself to indulge in the pleasures of life (*figure 20*).



*Figure 20. The red in this scene captures the alluring and deadly nature of desire.*

After David ensures that Uriah is killed in battle and takes Bathsheba for his wife, God punishes the land for the king's transgression, and the color scheme is abruptly inverted. The screen is almost completely devoid of color, reduced to a menacing, unpleasant mixture of greys and slight browns, the earlier robustly natural hues vanquished in the face of God's wrath. The shepherds that huddle in the face of the searing winds—who were also with David and Bathsheba during their earlier sojourn in the fields—bear witness to the fact that the Father has turned His face away from the people. Color and desire bring pleasure and fulfillment outside the bounds of the Law, but that Law still seeks to impose the punishment that is needed to maintain the social order. The actions that David and Bathsheba have taken have resulted in the steady collapse of both the national and the natural worlds.

As the broader world continues to falter, so does David's family threaten to collapse, as Michal and Nathan conspire with his sons to possibly replace him. What is perhaps most



surprising about the film's triangulation of desire, the Law, and the family is the extent to which the children in this film do not occupy the position that they had been accorded in the dominant postwar discourses I discussed above. From the beginning, the film makes clear that David's progeny will be engaged in conflict, both with him and with one another, as they continually contend to get the best slice of the inheritance. In that sense, they become just another incarnation of the prison of historical duty, a reminder of David's toxic relationships with those who should be the ones on whom he can rely. And, as Nathan's prophecy that David's kingdom makes clear, his children are also the harbingers of an unstable political future. The future of Israel will be one of strife, blood, and familial savagery.

Perhaps the film's most potent expression of the disruptive power of desire is the fact that God's wrath also strikes down the child that Bathsheba has born David. The colors here are suitably muted, the gathered mourners draped in black, Bathsheba's former shimmering sexuality reduced now to a shadow. The one thing that might have restored some measure of stability to their tumultuous romance—and to the state—has been stolen away. The palace has once more become a prison, a force that circumscribes David's actions and keeps him from attaining that ever-elusive stability. When Nathan leads the people against him, it is another reminder of the power of the Law to bring his entire reign into ruin. The browns and reds of the gathered rebels are a glaring reminder of the king's failing of his people in the pursuit of his own desire and an expression of the pleasure of punishment, a primal explosion of divinely-sanctioned anger.

Confronted with this political reality, David announces that he will approach the Ark of the Covenant, determined to offer himself as a living sacrifice in Bathsheba's place to appease God's demand for blood. As he does so, color at last returns in full saturation, and the sequence begins with David entering the Tabernacle; as he does so, the screen is suffused with a menacing

orange that seems to taint even the green curtains in its fiery glow. As he reaches out and touches the Ark, however, the scene abruptly shifts through different chromatic registers, and for several seconds the screen is pervaded with first green and then blue, before finally entering a bleached appearance akin to that which showcased God's wrath. Color here becomes something more overtly menacing than its earlier incarnations, and in this moment David hangs in this terrifying white space, his very life in the balance. While it leads into a reverie in which David recalls his defeat of Goliath and his anointing by God, the sequence still ends with the fiery glow mixing unevenly with the blue tones that have accompanied God's forgiving rain. The wrath has been abated and Bathsheba has been spared, but the lingering unease hovers there, the menace of savage color still in excess of the closure seemingly offered by narrative.

Thus, although David and Bathsheba have been forgiven by the God whose Law they have both willingly and wittingly transgressed, the film does not provide them what the narrative has seemingly suggested nor what the historical world in which the film is set demands: a child and heir, and the film makes no attempt to ameliorate this lacuna. David and Bathsheba are united in forgiveness, but their child still lies dead, and a closer glance at the film's ending reveals a profound sense of pessimism about the future political and social stability of Israel itself. As Nathan blisteringly points out, David's selfish, thoughtless actions—his pursuit of the married Bathsheba, his willingness to send one of his own men to death on the front lines so that he can gain his wife—have demolished both his life and that of the people he is supposed to lead. The bittersweet ending illustrates R. Barton Palmer's claims about the conclusions of many of Peck's films. He writes: "the enduring final images in Peck's films capture archly melodramatic moments of reconciliation, coupling, and, occasionally, a painfully triumphant sense of loss" (55). The final moments of *David and Bathsheba* contain elements of all three.

At work here, I suggest, is an expression of the epic's fundamental difficulty in imagining, still less visually representing, a viable, stable, and peaceful human future, even in a film in which erotic desire, the key to such a future in the postwar imagination, plays such a prominent role. While some will no doubt recognize that Bathsheba and David's union will eventually produce the future King Solomon, the taint of Nathan's prophecy hangs over the conclusion, undiluted by the production of a decisive heir. The color palette here remains in conflict, with the frame nearly divided between red, with all its blood-and-desire-soaked associations and somber, subdued blues with their connotations of peace, stability and emotional fulfillment (*figure 21*). The uncertainty of life in the aftermath of God's seeming forgiveness, has suffused the very fabric of the film. The film's peaks of color encourage a feeling of escape from and then a re-encountering of the terrifying nature of antiquity.



*Figure 21. The divided color palette conveys the ambiguity of the future.*

If, as Babington and Evans assert, David's and Bathsheba's transgression of the Law contains a desire for self-annihilation, this seems entirely appropriate, considering the milieu in which the film emerged (85). As I have already demonstrated, desire in the immediate postwar years remained intertwined with the specter of mass destruction, the desire for life and the desire for death entangled at the very heart of the American psyche. Seen in this context, it makes sense that these characters should repeatedly be reminded of this dangerous tide. The rare moments of brilliant color are frequently chaotic, registering the unrest that the narrative of the film attempts, but never quite succeeds, to reconcile. In *David and Bathsheba*, both past and future remain shrouded in the ambiguities of transgressive desire. Erotic pleasure may be “the liberating force of the individual, the breaker of repressive social bonds that chain the individual’s unique sensibility to the dreary morality of middle-class culture and its life-denying rationalism,” but it also demands its pound of flesh (Thornton 216).

#### Nero’s Queer Exuberance

I turn last to *Quo Vadis*. Here, color takes on a subversively queer valence as it becomes increasingly associated with the desires, whims, and senselessly vindictive nature of the Roman Emperor Nero (Peter Ustinov). Garbed in hyper-saturated hues that constantly draw the eye, Nero embodies a powerful, subversive, explosive force of queer desire. This is a desire founded on the essential drive for more pleasures to be indulged, an immersion in the world of the senses. While the film’s narrative suggests that the future belongs to the morally upright (and hetero-reproductive) Christians, its chromatic spectacle expresses a desire to inhabit the pagan present. *Quo Vadis* and its queer color pleasures creates a perverse utopia, where the problems associated with the postwar future (or lack thereof) find their deadly solutions in the terror of the deviant.

*Quo Vadis* opens with a voiceover proclaiming that it takes place during the height of the power of ancient Rome, when the proud eagles are about to be displaced by the humbler sign of the Cross and all it represents. Set against the backdrop of the debauched, self-centered reign of the Emperor Nero, the film primarily follows the romance between the returning Roman soldier Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) and the Christian maiden Lygia (Deborah Kerr). During their courtship, they both manage to run afoul of Nero and his wife Poppaea (Patricia Laffan), and as a result they find themselves imprisoned and threatened with death in the arena. However, the fickle Roman people turn against their leaders, leading Nero to murder his wife before taking his own life with the assistance of his spurned mistress Acte (Rosalie Crutchley). The film ends with Marcus and Lygia united in love, fleeing the city of Rome while the victorious legions of the Roman general Galba march in to replace Nero's corrupt regime.

The film's opening sequence showcases the brutality of the Roman way of life, with hordes of slaves marching across the screen while the main character Marcus drives a chariot and hysterically performs his masculinity. Taylor's Marcus is the epitome of the rugged masculine ideal taken to a level of hyperbole, his scarlet red cape and hard, gold breastplate proclaiming his devotion to a life of blood, war, and conquest. Having served on the frontiers, he has no idea how to appropriately behave in the confines of the civilized life of the city. He is a man brimming over with sexual vitality, so extreme in his masculinity that he does not even know how to civilly engage with Lygia—he assaults her and even attempts to take her as a slave—and it is only once he accepts the moderating, feminine influence of Christianity that his unruly masculinity is tamed, rendered fit for service to the new faith.

The viewer's first sight of Nero is similarly extreme, as he indulges in the adulation of the court, surrounded by those who fawn upon and flatter him while he "composes" his music,

rendering himself a spectacle for those who surround him (*figure 22*). While the courtiers are presented in shades of white and green, Nero is draped in a purple robe that pulls the eye to itself, inviting a caress and supplementing the wicked allure that Ustinov's Nero exudes, a man driven by nothing more than his own appetite and his own desires. Any time that Nero appears in the frame, his sartorial elegance shines numinously, encouraging a vicarious pleasure in Nero's sadistic narcissism and avaricious desires. It is no accident that this narcissism remains coded as queer; in a revealing anecdote in one of his memoirs, Ustinov recalls that director Mervyn LeRoy suggested that he should play Nero as a man who "plays with himself nights" (243). Nero's behavioral narcissism stems from his inward-turned sexual desires, his inability to see a world outside himself.



*Figure 22. Nero's vibrant costumes command the gaze.*

As with Delilah, it is easy to dismiss Nero as an unsubtle attempt on the part of postwar American culture to pathologize and expel the homosexual, to tame the threat that such a figure represents to the state and to the faith (which are, in any case, intimately connected). However, Nero, and the corrupt, opulent court over which he rules, can also be read as a form of queer

resistance to Cold War domestic ideology, his narcissistic, child-like desires stubbornly refusing to accept this ethos. Color in this film expresses, in a primal, sensual form, this desire to indulge in the resistant present. The Technicolor cinematography—which always renders Nero the center of attention in hues of violet, mauve, and pink—encourages moments of sensual contemplation, a desire to linger over the lush image of his sartorial elegance and a desire for more chromatic spectacle in which to indulge. Rather than remaining caught up in the relentless forward flow of narrative—which pushes toward the romantic, heterosexual fulfillment of the two leads—color here provides another avenue of visual experience, one of endless deferral rather than narrative satisfaction. This is the pleasure of the diegetic pagan present rather than the hetero-Christian future, an embrace of the world of objects rather than the insubstantiality of the spirit.

Nero, as the embodiment of Rome, should invest in the production of a child to carry on his Julio-Claudian dynasty, but instead he queerly resists this basic political imperative. Other than a few references to Lygia's narrow hips, he makes no reference to his reproductive responsibilities. He is a drive with no bounds that stubbornly refuses the fulfillment of reproductive closure. He is surrounded by all the spectacular opulence that Rome can provide, yet he always wants more. He wants the perpetual adoration of his courtiers, the sacrifice of more and more Christians, more destruction (he orders the burning of Rome for his own inspiration). He has no thought for children and the stability they provide, and his only acknowledgment the future is the role that *he* will play.

The narrative of *Quo Vadis* suggests that Nero represents the corruption of a European style of baroque, corrupt, old world autocracy. Maria Wyke has shown how his deviance—as well as that of the Romans generally—is a fundamental allegory for the dictatorships of the Axis powers and for the increasingly powerful Soviet Union (142). What this analysis misses,

however, is that Nero is a particularly *queer* sort of dictator. Just as a genre such as *film noir* generated subversive potential for both queer spectatorship and representation, so Nero and all his chromatic excess offers an ironic counterpoint to the relentless heterosexism of the film's narrative progression. He offers an opportunity to critique the shortcomings of Christianity, with its emphasis on the future, the prison of reproductive duty, and the denial of the vitality of sex.

Laffan's Poppaea, while not as straightforwardly queer as her husband, still partakes in a similar pursuit of pleasure for its own sake rather than for the purposes of political reproduction. She takes delight in pursuing Marcus, adopting for herself the agency associated with sexual desire rather than acquiescing to the demands of "suitable" female behavior. The classicist Monica Cyrino points out that Poppaea's desires find expression in the very structure of the film itself, "suffusing the screen with her vanity, ambition, jealousy, and sexual appetite" (24). Any time she appears, the film flushes with desire as her gaze takes in her prey. With her ever-present cheetahs as her companions, Poppaea is lust made flesh, the camera's lingering look on the fabric of her gown heightening the allure of a longing that knows no bounds (*figure 23*). Like Nero, she shows no signs of producing an heir to maintain the political stability of the empire.



*Figure 23. The predatory female gaze suffuses the film.*



The film frequently gives itself up to the sexual and visual temptations of ancient Rome. Compared to what should be the more moving and transcendent pleasures—the sermon that Peter delivers to the gathered Christians in the catacombs, the burgeoning love affair between Marcus and Lygia, the conversations with Paul—the sequences with the Romans are far more visually stimulating. In one of the film’s most noteworthy scenes of visual excess, both Nero and Poppaea gaze through little mirrors of colored glass, each spying on the awkward and antagonistic courtship of Marcus and Lygia (*figures 24 and 25*). The camera adopts their perspective so that the color of the glasses suffuses the screen, encouraging a feeling *with* the jealous monarchs as they indulge in their darkest emotions. As Paul Coates has eloquently written of color, “whereas black and white have a clear, banal violence in the widespread codes aligning them conventionally with Evil and Good, no such transcendental anchor attaches to the colours of the spectrum [...] In the cinematic color world, not only do Good and evil switch sides [...] they may not even exist” (38). Color thus destabilizes the supposedly firm division the narrative seeks to establish between the morally upright Christians and the decadent Romans. In doing so, it opens up a space for a pleasurable indulgence in a world of sinister feelings of jealousy, rage, and desire.





Figures 24 and 25. *Color disrupts the moral binary of the film.*

The visual plenty and barbaric splendor of this scene stands in marked contrast to many of the scenes with the Christians, which are marked by their associations with the homelier qualities of hearth, the home, and the transcendent. Peter, for example, appears dressed all in white, and when he recounts the last supper he shared with Jesus and his fellow apostles, the film relies on a recycling of da Vinci's masterpiece to depict this scene. On one level, this strategy signifies artistic respectability. On another, it makes clear that these pivotal moments in the history of the faith are accessible only through Peter and his memory. Time moves forward and Jesus becomes a part of *history*, increasingly less available to those who live in the present.

Color also associates the Christians, especially Lygia, with more peaceful natural forces of reproductive nature. For example, she appears in the banquet scene garbed in a blue gown dappled with stars, indicating that hers is the serene side of nature to Poppaea's destructive one. The film repeatedly uses color to associate her with fecundity, including pale pinks, creams, and blues, and she thus becomes the possibility of the future (Blanshard and Shahabudin 48). The film suggests that the Christians will own this future, for only they can be trusted to continue to channel their desires appropriately. According to this logic, the meek shall inherit the Earth.

However, the film also acknowledges that while the future may belong to Christ and his followers, the bounteous present belongs to the Romans, and color comes to represent the conjoining of beauty, plenty, and pleasure with destruction, chaos, and terror. It is no accident that the most spectacular scenes of chromatic excess—the burning of Rome in its red-orange, terrifying majesty; the suicide banquet of the poet Petronius with its lusty crimson bunch of roses that matches Seneca’s crimson garment; and, of course, the throwing of the Christians to the lions while the colorful Romans (Nero and Poppaea chief among them) look on—are paired with truly horrifying deaths. Color and movement, so symbolic of life, become disturbingly intertwined with the drive toward mortality and dissolution.

The arena scenes particularly stand out for their naked embrace of the queer pagan present. Given that, as I have noted, in postwar America homosexuality was increasingly understood to be tied to the general anomie of a culture in despair over the bomb, the film invites an abandonment to the punishments that the sadistically queer Nero metes out. Throughout this sequence, the garish, too-bright colors—Nero’s robes, the piercing yellow-whiteness of the sands—mesh with the editing to provoke an embrace of both the frenzy of martyrdom and the brutal empowerment of the sadistically queer emperor.<sup>30</sup> The emperor’s chromatic queerness invites a pleasurable unsettling feeling of complicity in the torments, an indulgence in a demonic otherness that acknowledges the power of queerness to punish the Christians and the future that they represent. The film thus engenders a space in which the darkest desires of the postwar psyche—for oblivion, for punishment (both giving and receiving), for an all-consuming embrace of the present—can be experienced.<sup>31</sup>

However, in this world turnabout is also fair play, and the unpredictable Roman crowds turn against their rulers, and the color palette grows increasingly chaotic as Nero flees from the

people's revolt. The shots of the rebellious citizens betray an unsettling awareness of the uncontrollable nature of historical forces, a disturbing iteration of the "surge and splendor" identified by Sobchack as one of the key functions of the genre as a form of history. The crowd itself becomes a bursting forth of emotion and movement similar to the orgiastic, shattering violence witnessed in the Temple of Dagon, threatening to overturn the appropriate order of society (no matter how corrupt it might be under the rule of Nero). The color scheme of the following scenes bear out this sense of menace, as the brightness is gradually lowered, the entire world of the film reduced to a darkened womb.

As Nero retreats into the palace, the color deepens, full of bruised purple shadows, a royal prison from which Nero cannot and will not escape. At last, he is confronted by the "phallic mother" Acte, a spurned lover who has now appears draped in bluish-black robes to bring about his death (Babington and Evans 205). The world here is reduced to a primordial darkness, a buildup to the exquisitely, painfully pleasurable moment when Acte at last plunges the knife into his chest. Cyrino suggests that this moment invites Nero into the "feminine forces of love and peace" (32). I would take this one step further. It also points to the future-obliterating queerness that he represents, and his death is not only a punishment for his gendered transgressions but also, and more importantly, a subversive rejection of the dull, heteroreproductive future offered by Christianity. He embodies the pleasurable release of death, the histrionic scream and twisted countenance that accompany his death a mixture of agony and ecstasy (*figure 26*).



*Figure 26. Nero's last scream as an embrace of jouissance.*

The film thus betrays an uncertainty about how fulfilling the Christian message that its narrative conveys can be. In rendering Nero's queerness so compellingly visible—and in giving him the historical power to murder Christians at whim—the film indulges in a peculiar form of queer fantasy.<sup>32</sup> While its narrative clearly wants to condemn him for his excesses, the spectacle that it uses to do so suggests that the queerly pleasurable present can serve as a site of resistance to the Christian future, with all its burdens. *Quo Vadis* presents a Roman world full of erotic, sensual pleasures that are as distracting as they are beautiful. In doing so, it punctures the myth of Christian triumphalism, offering an opportunity, unsettling yet also irresistibly alluring, to encounter the terrifying oblivion of queer pagan temporality.

This uncertainty also undergirds the film's inability to bring to fruition the Christian hegemony toward which it aspires. As Marcus and his friend Nerva stand watching the proud legions of the general Galba march into the city, they ruminate on what will follow in the wake of Galba's victory. Marcus intones a list of the great powers that have preceded Rome: "Babylon. Egypt. Greece. Rome. What follows?" His fellow soldier responds, "A more

permanent world, I hope.” While Marcus responds to that last bit of ambiguity with the proud remark that a more permanent faith will also help to shore up this alluded-to order, neither this comment—nor indeed the film’s final scene of Marcus and Lygia making their way out of Rome in the ancient Roman family equivalent of the family station wagon—can quite undo the embrace of death, chaos, and desire in which the film has so conspicuously indulged. Nero, like the homosexual defined by McPartland, keens over his dying society, his song a haunting reminder of the seductive allure of the queer.

### Conclusion

Confronted with the shocks of the past and the potential (and potentially unspeakable) traumas of the future, American culture in the first few years after the end of World War II struggled to right itself. While the past was strewn with the bodies of the dead, the present was filled with soldiers who struggled to make sense of their new lives. Women who had experienced financial independence in the workforce were now being (strongly) encouraged to return to the home and to spend their husband’s money on the newest, shiniest, most colorful consumer goods. And over everything hung the possibility that the bomb might bring an end to it all, engulfing past and present into itself and foreclosing the future.

Produced in this deeply conflicted milieu, the epic emerged as a perilously utopian form of Hollywood entertainment. While it offers antiquity as a cornucopia of sensual and erotic pleasures—the shimmering sleekness of fabric, the fierce golden gleam of armor, and the brutal allure of the pagan gods—it is also a world full of danger and death. Technicolor, with its utopian sensibilities, deftly captures the conjoining of these two impulses, and while this emerges most viscerally in *Samson and Delilah* and *Quo Vadis*, with their arresting chromatic

compositions, it also writhes beneath the surface of the narrative of *David and Bathsheba*. Both desire and death allow for a loss of control, an abandonment to the more sinister aspects of the human psyche, the vicious emotions of rage, anger, and jealousy that threaten the social order. The peaks of color in these films are thus points of fracture in the increasingly dominant containment ethos, expressing the irreconcilable contradictions at the heart of Cold War American culture. Rather than fleeing from the darkness and paradoxes of the human psyche, however, the epic embraces them.

Anne Carson writes that desire “seems to [...] demolish time in the instant when it happens, and to gather all other moments into itself in importance” (117). The Technicolor epics I have discussed similarly fold the traumatic past and the imperiled future into the intense present of chromatic desire. However, they also provide the ultimate pleasure in the great crash that the films figure as the inevitable punishment for the sins of the wicked. It is thus not simply a lesson—be a good sexual citizen or you will face the wrath of God—but also an opportunity to experience the visceral feeling of encountering the moment of spectacular cataclysm and the subsequent flight from the fierce limits of a future-directed historical destiny. The pressures of living in historical time are forgotten in these moments of Dionysian disaster.

While sexuality—and color—would gradually become a secondary concern in the epics of the mid-to-late-1950s, the issue of human sexual desire would emerge occasionally in an epic such as *Solomon and Sheba* (1959). In this film, color once again erupts to disturb the discipline imposed by sacred narrative, forcing the spectator to grapple “with the paradoxes of desire [...] it is dangerous, but it is necessary, and there is no point in *trying simply to repress it*” (109 emphasis mine). Gina Lollibrigida’s Sheba—full of pulsing, dangerous vitality—challenges the dictates of Jehovah and his earthly representative Solomon (Yul Brynner), and the infamous orgy

once again brings down the wrath of God to smite his temple and demonstrate the necessity of punishing illicit desire. And again the ending is ambivalent, the heterosexual closure that the film has held out as a distinct possibility foreclosed when Sheba, framed in the colorless ruins of Solomon's marvelous Temple, walks away from the romance that she had formed with the Israelite king. In this film, as Raymond Durgnat would pithily remark: "salvation and tragedy are one" (48). The epic forces an encounter with the uncomfortable space between the potential for romantic fulfillment and its never-ending deferral.

The fraught space between infinite potential and inevitable foreclosure would remain a key part of the epic's envisioning of history, a dynamic exacerbated by the uncertainties greeting the beginning of the 1960s. In the next chapter, I discuss two of the final entries in the postwar cycle of epic films, *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), demonstrating the extent to which the heights of human accomplishment and the promise of an infinitely better future remained inextricably bound up with their sinister twin.



**Chapter 4—Paradise Lost: Melancholic Utopia and the Experience of History in *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964)**

“Epic,” the classicist Joanna Paul writes, “is bound up with beginnings and ends, growth and decay, foundation and death” (303). She revealingly uses the rhetoric of binding, exposing a key tension at the heart of the epic historical experience. The genre’s form—both narrative and spectacle—intertwines historical moments of zenith and nadir, of infinite possibility and permanent foreclosure. The epics produced in the 1960s, even more explicitly than their 1950s predecessors in the cycle, render visible the anxiety over America’s role in history and the possibility of another global conflict, contending with the key contradictions of the period: between the utopian promises of global accord offered by such bodies as the United Nations and the persistent realities of the real world, from the dissolution of the old imperial powers to the ever-present tensions of the Cold War and the possibility of atomic end. The final ancient world epics confront these anxieties through the conjoining of the utopian temporality of spectacle with the inescapable finitude imposed by narrative.

In this chapter, I argue that the 1960s entries of the epic cycle articulate what I call a “melancholic utopia,”—a mourning for a lost, better world that was always a possibility but never fully-realized—focusing on *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). The characters in these films possess a form of what film scholar Tom Brown has theorized as the “historical gaze,” a clairvoyance that allows them to see their place in the workings of history and the unfolding of the future.<sup>1</sup> These figures—Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, Livius, Marcus Aurelius—believe in their ability to craft a better world than the one which preceded them, and the spectacular displays that emerge in key narrative moments express their lofty

historical aspirations, suspending time's inexorable movement and creating an instant full of infinite possibility. However, the films' narratives, driven toward failure, suffuse this time-stopping, utopian spectacle with the despair of inevitable historical decline. These films thus provide an experience of history that holds the promise of contingency (the moment of pure potential) in tension with the finality of foreclosure (the cessation of that promise).

I begin by discussing the geopolitical concerns of the late 1950s and early 1960s, focusing on three prominent areas. The first is the formation and function of the United Nations, an organization which articulated a postwar utopian longing for an end to the cycle of conflict that had marked so much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Even though the aspirations of the organization would be thwarted by Cold War realities, the possibility that the world could be made better through international cooperation suffused its ethos. The second is the concurrent decline of the old imperial powers and their rapid disintegration. The third area of concern revolved around the changing role of the U.S. on the global stage. While America positioned itself as the defender of freedom against the tyranny of both the old colonial powers and the USSR, there was a growing recognition that this great power might be falling into the imperialist patterns of its predecessors, with all the perils and promise that such a position entailed. After all, if the new hegemon was an imperial power, what was to keep it from falling into the same cycle of zenith and decline that had afflicted those that had come before? To illustrate how the epic films of this period engage with these historical questions, I move into a discussion of the relationship between narrative and spectacle, demonstrating how these two elements of the epic remain in productive tension, so that the utopian longing for a better world-that-might-have-been remains perpetually foreclosed even in the moment of its seeming fulfillment. During the most

optimistic moments of spectacular beauty, the collapse of these ancient worlds remains crushingly imminent and stiflingly immanent.

### The Utopian Dream(s) of the United Nations

In the postwar world, no body represented the collective hopes, dreams, and aspirations of collective humanity more than the United Nations. Born from the ashes of World War II, the organization was the brainchild of the Allies. For them, it represented the possibility of a remade global order, one that would not fall into the same pitfalls of its predecessor, the League of Nations. The latter, for a variety of reasons—not least the lack of United States membership—had failed to keep the world from plunging into a second globe-spanning conflagration. The ideas that would later become central to the United Nations were first articulated in the 1941 Atlantic Charter, which proclaimed (among other things) that all people would have the right to self-determination and that there was to be a general disarmament once the war was over. When the Allies issued the United Nations Declaration in 1942, they drew upon those principles, as did the United Nations when it was officially founded in 1945 (“1941” n.p.n.; “1942” n.p.n.).

Though there were some in the American intelligentsia who expressed skepticism about the United States becoming more involved in the events of the wider world and preferred the isolationist ethos that had dominated the country before the outbreak of war, many were caught up in a spirit of optimism. As Stanley Meisler puts it, “between the climactic months of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, Americans had high hopes for a future United Nations [...] Americans could envision the Soviet Union joining the United States in policing the new peace in the brighter new world that would arise from the carnage” (2). Given that the United States, in contrast to many of the nations of Europe, had emerged from the war mostly unscathed

and with enormous financial, military, and industrial power, it comes as no surprise that it would continue to believe that it had a special role to play in the shaping of world events. Along with the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the Republic of China, America was to be one of the Four Policemen that Roosevelt envisioned maintaining world peace once the war was over.

In the beginning, the United Nations was imagined as a body that would be more than the sum of its constituent parts. As Rosemary Righter, drawing on Karl Popper's philosophy, observes, "The Soviet Union and the United Nations had one thing in common. Each was constructed 'with the desire to build a world which is not only a little better and more rational than ours, but which is free from all its ugliness: not a crazy quilt, an old garment badly patched, but an entirely new coat, a really beautiful new world'" (21). She goes on to demonstrate the extent to which many of the U.N.'s aspirations for the emerging international order were too high to achieve, sowing the seeds for future disappointment and discord. Just as importantly, there was also a potent, and terrifying, realization that there was no power on earth that could effectively "prevent, or survive, war between the superpowers" (32). Only the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union kept one another in check, and that their actions toward one another—and toward the other, less powerful states that constituted the United Nations—would be held up to global scrutiny, kept the world from falling again into all-out military confrontation. While the U.N.'s stated aim to declare war against war itself might have been a bit overambitious, the fact that such was an aim of the organization in the first place reveals the depth of the desire to avoid the sort of devastation that had nearly destroyed the world and that threatened to do so again.

However, even in the heady early days of the 1940s there were rumblings of the conflict between the Americans and the Soviets that would later come to have momentous consequences.

Throughout the founding years, disagreements arose on various issues, ranging from the use (and abuse) of the veto to whether the constituent states of the Soviet Union should each be given a separate vote. There was a growing sense among many Americans that the Soviets were willing to wreck the entire organization if they did not get their way, and the United Nations itself seemed slightly paralyzed in its inability to effectively broker between the two superpowers. Ultimately, Stanley Meisler contends, the UN would be forced to play a secondary role in the various crises that would emerge in the Cold War (Meisler 1-35).

As the Cold War escalated, it became ever more obvious that the United Nations would be unable to contain the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The formation of two parallel allied bodies—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955—brought the limitations of the United Nations into sharp relief. The UN might have aspired to be more than the sum of its parts, but there was no escaping the fact that its power to police the actions of its two strongest constituent members was severely curtailed by harsh political realities. While it could, and frequently did, intervene in other conflicts outside of this central battle of the Cold War, it remained largely a third term in an increasingly binary world (Cyrino 151-152).

The United Nations also had to cope with the growing independence and nationalist movements that were breaking apart the old colonial empires. The decade between 1955 and 1965 saw the membership of the organization swell with the inclusion of states that had declared their independence from their colonial overlords. This engendered frequent discussion in the United Nations, not only about whether such countries should be granted independence, but also how fast. More generally, it also raised questions about the role of the United Nations as an institution. For example, was the U.N. supposed to stop conflict after it began, or was it supposed

to address the *sources* of such conflict with an eye to preventing it? For many of the newly emergent countries, the answer was the latter, and they frequently saw the organization as an instrument of change, while the colonial powers resisted, or at least sought to influence, the pace of these changes. For its part, the United Nations frequently struggled to effectively balance these competing demands (Luard 6-8).

Tensions also emerged between the United States and its ally Great Britain, especially regarding the latter's persistent belief in its imperial mission. These disagreements had their roots in the 1940s, for though a key part of the ethos surrounding the Atlantic Charter—and a subsequent part of the mission of the United Nations—was a commitment to self-determination, Churchill did not read this in the same way that his American allies did. Throughout the end of 1941 and into 1942, he went out of his way to reassure his nervous countrymen that this declaration was only meant to apply to those countries still laboring under the Nazi yoke, not Britain's own imperial possessions (Louis *Imperialism* 121-133). Throughout the war years Roosevelt was more concerned about Britain's territorial ambitions in the postwar world than he was about the Soviets. For Roosevelt, and for many who advised him, Great Britain represented the perils of imperialism and colonialism, and as such it posed a significant threat to the unified and free world that the Americans sought to create (*Imperialism* 20-22).

While the United States emerged from the war with a belief that it had been granted the right to make the world safe for democracy and to serve as the champion of those countries who wished to establish their independence, the British saw things quite differently. The historian William Roger Louis notes that “no less than the First World War, the Second World War brought about a revival of the sense of Britain's imperial mission” (*Imperialism* 15). The desires of Churchill and his successors notwithstanding, there was no question that the United States was

not about to stand by while Great Britain reasserted its control over its imperial domains when the war was over, particularly when it had already made such a point of emphasizing its willingness to support the oppressed peoples of the world.<sup>2</sup> While this sentiment may have been primarily intended for the nations threatened by the totalitarianism represented by the Soviet Union, it could just as easily have been applied to the peoples seeking independence from the British, the French, and the other colonial empires.

As it turned out, the British would indeed have their own conflicts and troubles to deal with after the war was won. India declared its independence in 1947, and throughout the next two decades peoples throughout the Empire would do the same, including Myanmar/Burma (1948), Libya (1951), Sudan (1956), Ghana (1957), Malaysia (1957), Nigeria (1960), Jamaica (1962), and Kenya (1963). Other imperial powers saw a similar dismantling of their imperial domains, and while some would put up more of a fight than others—France's attempts to maintain control of Vietnam (1945-1954) and Algeria (1946-1954) being two cases with profound consequences—the writing was already on the wall. The old ways of doing things were over. The Old-World empires, like their predecessors in antiquity, were fated to fall.

No incident made this clearer than the Suez Crisis of 1956, which was precipitated by the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalization of the Canal in an effort to assert independence from the colonial powers that had formerly controlled it. In response, the British joined with both the French and the Israelis to wrest control of the canal from the Egyptian government and maintain the flow of oil that had become such an essential part of the postwar global economy. Unfortunately for the invaders, they were met with stiff resistance from the Egyptian forces, and the United States staunchly refused to provide any aid whatsoever to the invasion effort, correctly assuming that to be seen doing so would damage the country's

reputation in the eyes of the very decolonizing nations that it was attempting to court in its efforts at containment.

As a result of President Eisenhower's refusal to assist the invading forces, the Crisis was an unmitigated disaster for the invaders, and it demonstrated that the United States would not intervene in international affairs to prop up the imperial ambitions of others, even if those others happened to be its allies in the greater Cold War struggle. On November 1, John Foster Dulles complained that "it is no less than tragic, that at this very time, when we are on the point of winning an immense and longed-for victory over Soviet colonialism in Eastern Europe, we should be forced to choose between following in the footsteps of Anglo-French colonialism in Asia and Africa or splitting our course away from their course" (qtd. in Louis "Dulles, Suez, and the British" 153). The territorial ambitions of its allies would continue to be a distraction for the United States, ensuring that it was not just the colonial ambitions of its nemesis the Soviet Union that had to be battled, but also the resurgent imperialism of its supposed allies.

Whether the Crisis caused damage to Britain's actual imperial abilities or whether it simply laid bare the geopolitical realities that had simmered beneath the surface since the end of the war remains unclear. What was certain, however, was that the days of Great Britain as a superpower were effectively over. The country was now seen to have become so reliant on its American allies that it would not be able to undertake military actions of which its ally did not approve. It also ended the career of Anthony Eden and the belief, which he espoused and represented, that Britain was a great power. Any idea that the old British Empire would return to its former zenith was brought to a close with the blunder of Suez (Yergin 496).

Israel, the other major player in the Suez Crisis, also came to play an increasingly prominent role in both international affairs and in the ways that the epics of the period



understood the Middle East and the global future. Forged in adversity and conflict, Israel and the broader region became increasingly central to the postwar order. On the one hand, the new state represented the possibility of rebirth after the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. On the other, the continuing conflicts it which it was embroiled—particularly involving the Arab nations—sowed the seeds for a conflict that would continue for years to come. The United States, as one of the fledgling nation’s chief allies, would find itself increasingly drawn into the conflicts of this geopolitical hotspot.

The postwar epic, naturally enough, situates many of its narratives in exactly the region of the world where so many major conflicts were taking place. A film like *Cleopatra*, with its narrative of a great Egyptian leader determined to forge a destiny for her country against the will of great imperial powers who would exploit her country for its own gain would no doubt have resonated with many familiar with the Crisis just a few years earlier. This is not to say that the film is an allegory of the Crisis, but to instead demonstrate the extent to which the unrest in the Middle East exposed the fragility of the old imperial powers and limned the ascendance of a new imperial order in the form of the United States of America.

#### American Empire Ascendant

A prominent editorial in *Life*, published November 12, 1956—slightly less than a week after the end of the Crisis—proclaimed that, in hewing to its anticolonial principles, the United States had greatly boosted its international prestige. Now, the editorial argued, “we have even been presented with the chance to exert the moral leadership of the world, not only to make peace in the Mideast but to help create a new rule of law in the world.” The editorial went on to argue that, with the United States in the lead, the U.N. could at last become a global force that

could “make a peace that sticks.” Recognizing that “the U.N. is the closest approximation the world has yet made to an instrument of law whose writ can run, however feebly, among all men,” the *Life* writer connected the dots between the two powers whose leadership had been tested by this international incident (53). If the United States could cement its role as the leader of the United Nations, that body might yet become a beacon for the rest of the world.

The Suez Crisis thus rendered visible a geopolitical reality that must have been obvious to many long before: that the United States was now the preeminent force in the world, capable of wielding the sort of unrivaled power that had marked the former empires at the height of their glory. Of course, in keeping with a long-standing tradition within American cultural life, this ascent to the pinnacle of imperial power was accompanied by a strenuous form of denial. The United States was determined to maintain its self-image of a power committed to anti-imperialism, insisting that it was merely fulfilling the responsibilities that had been thrust upon it by its victory in the war and by its mission to make sure that the world was not overcome by the evil ideology of communism. As Richard J. Barnet so aptly puts it, “the American imperial creed is expressed in anti-imperialist rhetoric” (20).

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of the most formidable political and historical minds of the postwar era, expressed this sentiment when he argued in 1949 that “history has thrust a world destiny on the United States. No nation, perhaps, has become a more reluctant great power” (219), his words suggesting that the United States was being *forced* to take on its new role. Clark Clifford, one of Harry Truman’s aids, would reflect in the 1970s that “when the Second World War Was over, we were the one great power in the world [...] And I think that, in addition to feeling a sense of responsibility, we also began to feel the sense of a world power, that possibly we could control the future of the world” (qtd. in Winkler, “A Critical Appreciation” 44). Both

Schlesinger and Clifford imply that the role of a great power entails both reluctance and responsibility; it is not that the United States has deliberately set out to become an empire. It has been compelled to do so because of the failings of its predecessors and the absolute necessity of ensuring that communism does not spread. Of course, the fact that the U.S. might have the power to shape the future to its own ends was also a powerful inducement.

Furthermore, embedded in these flights of rhetoric is something of a double bind. For if the United States had, reluctantly or otherwise, come to accept the fact that it was an empire (or, in more obfuscatory language, a great power), then it might just be victim to the same cycle of decline and fall as its predecessors. And while it might attempt to enforce its vision for the future upon the rest of the world, there was also the possibility that it might fail in doing so. If, as we have seen, the future was profoundly uncertain because of the atomic bomb, then all the efforts of the United States to shape that future to its own ends were just as likely to come to nothing as they were to lead to a future that was better than the imperialist, exploitative, and fiercely tribal past.

This ambiguity notwithstanding, material realities and actions undertaken in the aftermath of World War II revealed the extent to which the United States had easily assumed the role of its imperial predecessors. Even as early as 1940, Adolph Berle, the undersecretary of the U.S. Department of State, wrote that “the only possible effect of this war would be that the United States would emerge with an imperial power greater than the world had ever seen” (qtd. in McCormick 33). Events after the war would prove this sentiment correct. Julian Go demonstrates that throughout the postwar period the United States acted very much like the imperial powers that it had displaced and against which it was supposedly opposed. As the undisputed victor of the conflict, the U.S. was in a prime position to exploit its newfound

military and economic might, and it successfully extended its rule over many of the Pacific Islands that had been conquered by the Japanese but which now fell under American jurisdiction. Polls in 1946 indicated that many legislators wanted to annex the islands outright (120).

Furthermore, the United States also made copious use of the imperial infrastructure left behind by the colonial powers in its efforts to contain communism and increase the flow of capital. The United States continually exhibited a divided consciousness regarding its imperial allies, supporting them when it was expedient to do so and aligning with the nascent nationalist movements when it suited them. The United States might not have actively acquired new lands in a strictly legal sense, but its influence extended in very material ways nevertheless. “Rather than transcending the territorialism of old-world imperialism,” Go argues, “the American postwar state persisted in and depended on it” (121-125). The intervention in numerous countries, including: Greece (1948), Korea (1950-1953), Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Indonesia (1958), and Cuba (1961) revealed the extent to which the United States was willing to use its muscle to enforce its vision on the postwar world (Murphy 5). And of course, there was the prominent presence of American troops in Germany and Japan. The United States, for all its protests about its lack of a territorial empire, nevertheless managed to exert a powerful influence over the world.

Of course, this expansion on the part of the United States had deep roots in the country’s history. For all that its founding myths proposed that the nation was a city on a hill promoting the cause of liberty, the material realities, particularly for people of color and Native Americans, were something else. The philosophy of Manifest Destiny that had pushed the boundaries of the country beyond the original thirteen colonies all the way to the Pacific Ocean had revealed that the United States had territorial ambitions as avaricious and brutal as those possessed by the

British and the French, even if they were dressed up in nicer rhetoric. Furthermore, the actions that the United States had taken throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries similarly exposed the fact that the country that supposedly stood for the ideals of freedom and democracy was very much cut in the mold of its imperial predecessors. Its territorial acquisition of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam at the expense of the Spanish Empire in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century rendered this central contradiction at the heart of the American sense of self acutely visible.

Just as this influx of new nations placed tremendous stress on the U.N.'s ability to balance the competing demands of its constituent members, so the United States had to adopt a similarly divided stance toward the fledgling postcolonial nations. On the one hand, the U.S.—in the spirit of the Atlantic Charter in which it had had such an influential role in drafting—proclaimed itself the ally of all the subjugated peoples of the world who yearned for self-determination. On the other, it continued to remove leaders that it perceived as antithetical to American interests, often in direct opposition to the wishes of the people who had elected them. Though these were ostensibly undertaken to promote democracy in the world—and of course to foil Soviet expansionism and promote free trade—they also smacked of the very imperialism that the United States supposedly opposed (Go 124-125).

To make sense of itself as both an empire and as the bastion of freedom for all people in the postwar world, the United States made use of the myth that it was the protector of those yearning for freedom. Melani McAlister has shown how this bifurcated approach was key to the overall geopolitical aims of the United States in a form of what she terms “benevolent supremacy,” in which America imagined itself as the harbinger of a future free of the tyranny and enslavement that came with the Soviet way of life. According to this philosophy, America

was merely carrying out its destiny, to make sure that the emerging nations and nationalist movements remained allied with the United States rather than giving in to the temptation to ally themselves with the Soviet Union.

Kennedy, elected in 1960, distilled many of the hopes, dreams, and terrors of the decade and a half that had preceded him. With his dazzling persona and his charm, Kennedy emerged as a dynamic figure that was the best that America had to offer, one who, in many of his speeches, painted himself as a savior. John McClure argues that Kennedy's rhetoric: "emplots the times as ones of grave crisis but also great possibility, and casts America, a collective actant, now as a prisoner in need of rescue (by Kennedy, of course), now as a heroic protagonist in the global struggle, 'lighting the path to liberty for all the peoples of the world' [...]." Having been saved by him, "the reawakened nation, led by Kennedy, goes adventuring across the new frontiers of the times" (43). Binding together his dreams and aspirations for the "New Frontier" of the 1960s, an era of enormous potential but also great responsibility for the nation that he sought to lead, Kennedy was superbly able to tap into the collective consciousness of the period to justify the nation's global ambitions.

Unfortunately, all the golden aspirations that would attend his ascent to the presidency would be tarnished by the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, which revealed just how far he was willing to go to prove American strength to the Soviet Union. The conflict was the closest that the two powers would come to the all-out nuclear conflagration. The historian Alice L. George locates this event as a key moment that shattered the domestic calm that had prevailed in the immediate postwar years. In coming so close to a precipice from which there could be no return, the Crisis forced Americans to confront the numerous problems that afflicted its foreign policy, as well as the inherent danger in investing so much power in the person of the president. While

the Crisis was ultimately averted, and while Kennedy would attempt to make the world a safer, less volatile place in the aftermath, there was no question that the Missile Crisis had ripped away the thin skein of optimism that had characterized American society after the victory in 1945 (1-41). In the end, it seemed, all the efforts of the imperial United States to shape the future to its own ends were just as likely to end up in the ashes of the atomic age.

The epic of the early 1960s thus had to contend with a powerful set of forces that shaped both its form and its narrative concerns. On the one hand, the international situation was one in which increasing fragmentation and rising nationalist movements exposed the futility of the aims of the United Nations to maintain the status quo while also revealing the final collapse of the pre-World War II imperial order. On the other, the United States had already begun to act like the imperial predecessors it was supposedly replacing, even as incidents like the Missile Crisis exposed the fragility of its supposed international muscularity, an awareness made even more chilling by the assassination of JFK in 1963. The dawn of the 1960s was a period marked by increasing ambivalence, one in which the world seemed to be caught at the brink of the same sort of political upheaval that had led to the conflagration of World War II, but where it was equally likely that the power and optimism that the United States had been such a hallmark of the 1950s might continue into an ever-brighter period of peaceful cooperation. The epic attempts to provide solutions to these pressing problems. However, the imperative to restore stability to both a world beset with strife became too much to bear, and the fraught spectacle of these films brings this to vibrant and troubling life.

### Narrative, Spectacle, and Historical Experience

Unsurprisingly, scholarship surrounding the epic's articulation of imperial anxieties has tended to pay attention to its allegorical expressions. Maria Wyke argues for understanding the dictators of the epics as manifestations of America's understanding of the psychopathology of figures such as Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, a point echoed by Martin Winkler (Wyke 142-143; Winkler "Roman Empire" 50-76). Others, such as Geraldine Murphy (2004) and Steven Cohan (1997) have pointed out how the narratives of these films posit that the corrupt old world powers that were losing control of the world were to be replaced by the resurgent American order. The fact that the success of the (usually Americanized) heroes appears to have divine sanction solidifies these films' apparently triumphalist messages. In the epic imagination, the past (and to some extent the diegetic present) belongs to the colonial powers of the prewar period; the future belongs (or should belong) to America and to freedom, faith, and democracy. While these critiques are certainly useful for showing the explicit ways in which these films engage with Cold War geopolitical concerns, here I wish to emphasize the experience of historical time that these films seek to provide, particularly the methods by which they engage with the pressures of an increasingly uncertain geo-political future. To do so, it is useful to consider the tension between spectacle and narrative that manifests in film, as each of these elements conveys a very different experience of time and history.

Richard Dyer persuasively argues that entertainment forms use spectacle to provide imaginary solutions to the wants and needs—economic, social, political, cultural—of modern society. Where the latter offers exhaustion, scarcity, fragmentation, manipulation, and dreariness, utopia provides energy, abundance, community, transparency, and intensity. Writing in a similar tradition, Jane Gaines, drawing on the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, has written of cinema's



similarity to the dream, taking the worst *and* the best of our world and playing it back to us, rendering visible and experiential the better world we wish could exist. The “visual correlatives of the ‘world-improving dream,’” she writes, “carry the utopian sensibility in the angle of view as well as the use of scale, and just as easily in the climax of color and the virtuosity of special effects” (110). It is through the overwhelming visuality of the cinematic image—her prime example is the panorama—that cinema as a cultural form renders experiential the bliss of that better world. Bigger, in the collective imagination constructed by Hollywood, is always better.

The epic films I discuss in this chapter encode into their form a deeply conflicted version of this utopian sensibility, in which spectacle offers a moment of presence in which the problems of the present and future are symbolically resolved through what Tom Gunning has termed the “pure present tense” of the attraction (7). The attraction, in other words, engenders an experience of wonder, inviting the spectator to think not of what has come before or what will come after—as would be the case with narrative and its linear, cause-and-effect logic—but to merely bask in the appearance of what *is*. This is of course particularly germane to the epic, which utilizes moments of spectacular excess to interrupt the flow of narrative. To make use of Tom Brown’s spatial metaphor, spectacle operates according to a vertical logic, one that invites contemplation, while narrative operates according to a horizontal logic of forward movement (158).

This horizontal line is, according to Peter Brooks, a means of wresting meaning from the relentless flow of temporality, providing directionality and order. Brooks provocatively argues that “if the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*” (52). The ending imposes order on what has come before, the stasis that is both the repository of the energies the narrative has mobilized and the solution to the enigmas

that have kept the reader moving with the thrust of the story. Unlike spectacle, which aims for a suspension or cessation of temporal awareness, narrative remains inextricably intertwined with momentum, and the end continues to press on the other parts of the narrative as the *telos* toward which they inexorably move. The immanence of the end saturates every moment of a narrative.

Spectacle and narrative, therefore, often exist in an uneasy yet productive tension in a single text, and this is particularly true of the epic. This genre, perhaps more than any other, invests its narrative energies in a *telos*-oriented history. According to David Quint, the epic has long been associated with the stories of the winners of the great conflicts of history, while at the same time giving birth to an alternative narrative centered around the losers. This bifurcation impacts the ways the various iterations of the genre engage with the question of history and politics. “To the victor belongs epic,” he notes, “with its linear teleology; to the losers belongs romance, with its random or circular wandering. Put another way, the victors experience history as a coherent, end-directed story told by their own power; the losers experience a contingency that they are powerless to shape to their own ends” (9). Starting with *The Aeneid* and working through variations of the epic in the western literary tradition, he demonstrates how these two traditions have shaped the epic’s engagement with history. The second, romantic tradition has always existed in tension with and challenged the first, the losers’ viewpoint invariably calling into question the dominance of the victors, and the victors dictating the terms within which the subaltern voice of the losers can (or in many cases cannot) express their own agency.

The epics that I consider in this chapter bring together these two narrative patterns through spectacle. The protagonists of these films occupy a fraught position in terms of their historical agency. On the one hand, they possess a form of Brown’s historical gaze; these characters seem to belong more to the time in which the films were made than to the historical

setting, and this allows them to see the role that they are intended to play on the stage of history. They literalize this gaze, and their ambitions, through their mobilization of spectacle; they frequently gaze out at the great vistas of history, whether that be the Battle of Actium that decides Cleopatra's political future or the gathering of subject peoples upon which Marcus Aurelius gazes as he proclaims his vision for the future of the Roman Empire. Spectacle in this instance articulates a desire for time to stretch into a future that is better than the world the characters currently inhabit. The characters of these films, despite their ultimate inability to control the destinies dictated by the narratives in which they are enmeshed, nevertheless persist in acting as if they do. Thus, though they yearn to materialize their utopian desires, the violent thrust of narrative continually undercut these efforts, and this essential tension remains key to the epic historical experience.

#### The Foreclosed Future in *Cleopatra*

By the time that *Cleopatra* was released in 1963, the fortunes of the old Hollywood system were under increasing strain. The enormous financial returns of such films as *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus* had convinced the studios that the epic was still profitable, and that bigger and more expensive productions would almost invariably mean improved profits. Fox poured an outsized amount of resources into the film, hoping that by doing so they would be able to eventually recoup their losses and buttress the fortunes of their studio. The production suffered numerous setbacks however, including a shifting of the production from London to Rome because of Elizabeth Taylor's illness (which required the dismantling of one set and the assembly of another), her notorious love affair with co-star Richard Burton, and the brutal cuts to the film imposed by producers so that it could be shown as one film rather than two.<sup>3</sup>

It was thus no surprise that by the time of its release the film had already amassed such enormous expenses that its box office success, no matter how large, could not hope to offset them. As a result, the film did not turn a profit at the box office, though it was the top draw of the year. Its troubled production history has cast a long shadow, and subsequent writings on the film have attempted in part to understand what kept it from being the same enormous success, either financially or critically, as its predecessors. Some have drawn attention to the stronger narrative and acting during the first act of the film and the relative lack of energy in the second (a product of the cuts), while others have isolated Taylor's acting and relatively shrill voice (compared to the delivery of her co-stars).

Though many studies of the genre of the epic largely elide or glide over this film, Michael Wood gives it sustained attention, but he remains invested in understanding the film's failure as an epic. For him, the epic remains a fundamentally optimistic genre in the sense that it focuses on history's victors, while *Cleopatra* remains focused on those who are decidedly the losers. The characters in the film, he says, are essentially "confused people making a mess of things on the margins of history," and their actions seemingly have no effect on the unfolding of events, so that all the director can accomplish is a "stately gloom" (174-178). The film does not entirely understand the rules of the game that it has chosen to play, and for that reason it can never succeed. What Wood sees as the film's failures are in fact, I argue, a reflection of the historical moment that produced it, when the underlying form of the genre remained intact but were increasingly used to engage with a different cultural and social milieu, one in which the complacency and plenty of the Eisenhower years were coming under increasing strain.

More useful in that regard is the work of scholars such as Maria Wyke and Monica Cyrino. They see in the titular character echoes of such charismatic leaders as Golda Meir and

John F. Kennedy (director Mankiewicz intended to show Cleopatra as an ancient version of JFK). They also view Cleopatra's vision through the lens of the United Nations and the hope for a more peaceful world. Though I find their arguments on the film to be accurate and useful, in my discussion of the film I go beyond the apparent transparency of the film's narrative to explicate the experience of historical time that the film uses this historical background to convey. I focus on the film's tension between the utopian temporal suspension of spectacle with the temporal containment imposed by narrative.

Through this tension, *Cleopatra* conveys a poignant view of a world that might have been. Throughout the film, the title character wields the historical gaze, her use of spectacle visualizing her control of events. She does not at first experience history as one of the losers of the great struggles of the past, instead experiencing time as a utopian stage on which anything seems possible. The fact that the film was shot and exhibited in Todd-AO heightens this utopian sensibility, as the widened screen provides the feeling of being present at these pivotal moments of seemingly infinite potential. The film, however, contains this spectacle within a narrative whose motivating telos is death and dissolution. Through this interlacing of temporal progression and suspension, the film argues that individuals, and the empires of which they are a synecdoche, remain at the mercy of the very forces that they attempt to control. The zenith and nadir of historical fortune are bound together in the imagination of this final epic, collective humanity fated to pursue a path that is simultaneously linear and cyclical.<sup>4</sup>

*Cleopatra* follows the brief but incandescent career of its title character, memorably portrayed by Elizabeth Taylor. The film opens in 48 B.C., with the final moves in the devastating civil war between the Romans Julius Caesar (Rex Harrison) and Pompey. When the former pursues the latter to Egypt, he finds himself caught up in the civil war between Cleopatra and her

younger brother. Seeing Cleopatra's political and personal charms, he helps her to regain her throne, and the two begin their love affair that begets Caesar's son Caesarion. They remain an ideal match, for they each provide the other what they need to embark on the building of an empire that will span the entire Mediterranean world. Their dreams are shattered when Caesar is struck down by assassins, igniting another round of civil war, this time between Caesar's murderers and his two heirs, Antony (Richard Burton) and Octavian (Roddy McDowall). Antony is soon brought into Cleopatra's orbit, igniting another round of conflict between two Romans, this time ending in the death of Cleopatra and Antony, the rise of Octavian as the new Augustus, and the utter failure of the queen's lofty ambitions.

From the beginning, the film sets up a narrative pattern that is marked by a pernicious form of repetition from which no one—neither individuals nor empires—can escape. The war between Caesar and Pompey is part of a larger series of conflicts that have plagued the Roman world, draining its vitality. Caesar's wearied look at the expanse of the battlefield—and the smoke that rises from the bodies of his fellow burning Romans—heightens the sense of loss engendered by this civil conflict. The past weighs heavily on the film, filled as it is with the bodies of those who have fallen in the wars that have torn Rome apart (*figure 27*). It is only the fact that Caesar has at last emerged triumphant that promises that this cycle will end. However, even this moment is punctured by the revelation that Pompey has escaped to Egypt, and Caesar's pursuit of his erstwhile ally implies that the conflict will continue even beyond the bounds of Rome's territory. The entire Mediterranean world will be caught up in the conflagration. Caesar

may have triumphed—though as he remarks, over whom? —but it is ephemeral.



*Figure 27. The bleakness of civil war fills the Todd-AO screen.*

In Egypt, Caesar intervenes in the civil war between its dueling monarchs, Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy. When she is introduced, Cleopatra is a spectacle that both visually and narratively interrupts this cycle of conflict that has engulfed both Egypt and Rome. By the time she appears, it has already been well-established that Egypt, like Rome, has been caught up in internecine war. Her legendary emergence from the carpet is accompanied by a musical flourish that emphasizes the significance of this entrance. The fact that her appearance on-screen has been suspended for a surprisingly long amount of time (it occurs at around the 20-minute mark of the film), heightens the sense of anticipation. Further, the glamour of Taylor's persona captures a moment in which the queen and the star become one, distilling into her figure the potential for a future-changing romance between herself and the Roman general, and in the following scenes she frequently appears in the center of the frame, commanding both the gaze and the politics of her nation.

Cleopatra, unlike her brother, possesses foresight and political acumen. She has the skill to play the game of international diplomacy, but she also recognizes that with Caesar she has met

her match both politically and sexually. She understands the things that he lacks and sees in herself the ability to fulfill those needs, and in the early sequences of the film she looks through a hole in the wall and witnesses Caesar's affliction with epilepsy, the camera focusing on her eyes as she gazes *at* him (Ford and Mitchell 104). She thus gains a sharp awareness of one of his greatest weaknesses. Her knowledge extends to the country of Egypt. When she gazes at the maps that Caesar has been using to plan his campaign, she remarks that they do not show the whole of her nation; her knowledge of her kingdom is such that she can provide him the advantage he needs to succeed in war. Through the combination of her expertise and Caesar's military ability, she believes the two of them will be able to forge a lasting peace that will save both of their countries from collapse.

The queen's ambitions reach far beyond Egypt, for in Caesar she recognizes a kindred spirit, one who understands, with a historical clairvoyance akin to her own, his vaunted place on the stage of history. When she greets Caesar in the mausoleum of Alexander the Great, she articulates her vision of what a future shaped by the two of them might look like. She says: "Alexander understood it—that from Egypt he could rule the world [...] Make his dream yours, Caesar, his grand design. Pick it up where he left off. Out of the patchwork of conquest, *one world*, out of one world, *one nation, one people* on earth living in peace [...] The cloak of Alexander cannot be too heavy for Rome and Egypt to carry *together*" (emphasis mine). Throughout this speech, Cleopatra emphasizes togetherness and unity, and Lucy Hughes-Hallett demonstrates that this sentiment, of a union between east and west, male and female, Rome and Egypt, is one that has a deep history in the genealogy of the Cleopatra myth. For many, both during her own time and after, Cleopatra represented a golden age, a hope for a future that was quite radical in its desire to create a world founded on principles of internationalism, tolerance,



and constructive cooperation (100-102). For a 1960s audience, such a speech would also have had a resonance, not just for its envisioning of an ethos very like the one that the United Nations espoused, but also for its echoes of the “benevolent supremacy” that was such a prominent part of how the United States envisaged its political and historical role in the postwar world.

This thoroughly American hero—Taylor’s broad American accent sounds curiously and sometimes irritatingly off-key compared to the theatrically-trained cadences of Harrison and Burton—serves as an ideal vessel through which to articulate this particular historical feeling. Let me be clear, however: I am not arguing for Cleopatra as a transparent allegorical stand-in for the United States. Instead, I see her as a distillation of the hopes of not just the United States but also of a global audience that yearned for a future that was not doomed to repeat past mistakes. Cleopatra’s optimistic vision is fundamentally at odds with the pessimism and anxiety of the period; she promises that there will be a future without strife and need, a future not comprised of individual nations each looking out for themselves, but instead joined in a common purpose of mutual understanding. She says as much to Caesar, commenting that it is not the past that draws her—with all its flaws, its ineptitude, its tragedies—but the future, and her gaze looks off-camera, to a future where her vision is fulfilled. While Caesar sees himself as the victim of time, frequently lamenting that at age 52 he hasn’t enough hours left to see his ambitions brought to fruition, she sees time differently, as full of untapped potential.

It is thus particularly striking that Cleopatra compares herself to the Nile, a source of both permanence and futurity. On one level, this reads as essentialist, since it associates her with the fertility of nature. However, it also serves an important political strategy in that it allows her to promise to Caesar both a cessation of his conflicts with his fellow Romans (by giving him the material and human wealth he needs to solidify his power) and an heir to carry on his legacy.

This heir is both a biological and political necessity, for it means that Caesar's bloodline will continue, which is especially significant given that his Roman wife Calpurnia has been unable to produce a son. Just as importantly, Caesarion will bring together the Roman and the Egyptian in one person, the manifestation of both of his parents' dreams of greatness. This child embodies Cleopatra's vision, his body resolving the conflicts and tribal identities that fracture the contemporary reality of the film. He promises a future that is better than the present world in which the ambitions of Rome have come into conflict and constant feuding has destroyed the grand legacies of other, older civilizations such as Egypt.

This promise of a future finds its most potent expression in the triumphal entry that Cleopatra makes into the city of Rome. Though it has become somewhat infamous in discussions of the film for its superfluous display of spectacle, I argue that it is key to the experience of history that the film provides. To begin with, it taps into the attraction's pure presence, the apotheosis of time which halts narrative progression and the seeming inevitability of historical chaos and change. This moment represents one of the peaks of the film, when the endless flux of history is forgotten in the sumptuous display Egypt's wealth and power. Everything seems possible in the vision that Cleopatra has organized for the delectation of the gathered Romans (particularly Caesar), and the presence of Caesarion atop the ceremonial float solidifies the association between this spectacular moment and the fullness of time. This trio will reorganize the world according to their unified dream (*figure 28*).



Figure 28. *The spectacle as a utopian moment of infinite possibility.*

This scene also conveys a utopian vitality and dynamism, putting into play all of Richard Dyer's utopian elements of entertainment: energy (in the form of dancing and bodies in orgiastic motion); abundance (the sheer amount of material wealth on display); transparency (the moment represents the straightforward articulation of Cleopatra's ambitions); community (the heterogeneous nature of Cleopatra's country, with its racially diverse participants); and intensity (the political future that this moment represents). As overblown as it might seem, the moment provides for those witnessing it, both in the film itself and those in the theater, a moment of utopian pleasure that provides (temporary) solutions to the political problems of the period, both ancient and modern. Time, the enemy of Cleopatra and Caesar and all their ambitions, has been temporarily suspended.

The triumph, in other words, visualizes Cleopatra's historical vision. Its spectacular presence is unsurprising, for as David Quint remarks, the epic loves a parade, as it allows the historical victor to impose a tautology on the contingency of history, a representation of the ever-victorious hero (31-32). The moment presents a powerful sense of *what could be* if Cleopatra has her way. Her demonstration to both Caesar and to the watching Roman crowds shows that here is

a solution to the political squabbles and strife that have ripped their societies apart, an actualization of the political future that she articulated to Caesar in the Mausoleum of Alexander. Through this spectacle, the political problems that have occupied so much of the film's narrative are resolved, as the past, present, and future interweave. The past of Egypt, in all its vastness and its copious wealth and splendor, have been brought to show Rome what it could itself be if it embraces the union of Cleopatra and Caesar. This present of vitality, energy, and pleasure could be their future, rather than their past of unrelenting bloodshed.

However, simmering beneath the utopian desires of this moment is a pressing awareness of the narrative fate that lies in store for Cleopatra, Caesar, and all those watching this triumph. The dour spectators who scowl at Cleopatra are a reminder that not everyone has bought into the myth that she has begun to construct. They will also be the very men who side with Octavian when he decides in the aftermath of Caesar's death that he should be the one to carry on his great-uncle's legacy, even if that means bringing about the death of both Cleopatra and Antony. In that sense, this "high of the film precipitates, not just Caesar's, but Cleopatra's fall" (Ford and Mitchell 108). Embedded in the heart of zenith is the specter of its opposite, the precipitous decline that will occupy the film's second half.

This moment thus highlights the tension between contingency and foreclosure, zenith and nadir that will structure the remainder of film. Cleopatra's position at the top of the float suggests that she embodies a form of eternity, an extension of Egypt's most emblematic, sacred, and ancient architecture, the sphinx. Even the ceremonial dress she wears renders her into a cult object akin to an Isis statue—thus partaking in immortality—and literally encases her so that she can barely move (Ford and Mitchell 113). Cleopatra has rendered her historical vision legible on her own body, thinking that in doing so she has assured her legacy; her image will echo through

the ages. Through this triumph, she has seemingly attained for herself the ability to transcend the limits of historical time. At the same time, her stillness atop that statue also evokes the sinister shadow of the death that must inevitably be the end-point of all her ambitions.

Because of course, time waits for no man or woman, and so it moves the characters toward the other historical event that will have enormous bearing on Cleopatra's historical vision: Caesar's assassination at the hands of his fellow Romans. The assassination sequence is predicated on a tension between contingency and foreclosure. In one of the film's rare forays into the supernatural, the Egyptian queen gazes into a fire that has been conjured by a sorceress as Caesar enters the Curia. This moment is at first pregnant with historical possibility: for Cleopatra, it represents a key political opportunity, for if Caesar is granted further powers by the Senate it will be easier for them both to fulfill their desires. Indeed, that is why she attempts to *see* it, so that her historical gaze may be literalized in her physical vision. She remains poised on the brink of greatness. At the same time, this sequence also engenders a feeling of powerlessness, for she can do nothing to intervene once the assassination begins; she remains immobilized, unable to resist the historical forces that strike down her lover and the future that he represents. The flames that engulf the screen prefigure the conflagration that will not only consume Cleopatra's ambitions but also the entire Roman world (*figures 29 and 30*).



*Figures 29 and 30. Cleopatra watches powerlessly as her future goes up in flames.*

With Caesar's death, the vision that Cleopatra has taken such great pains to implement falls into pieces, swept away by another bout of civil war. The cycle—that Cleopatra's ascent to power had seemed to interrupt—has begun another rotation, sweeping all the characters along in its wake. As Antony puts it to her somewhat later, he has been left to pick up the pieces of a broken world. The fact that he is not nearly as adept a politician or a general as Caesar becomes one of the film's structuring conflicts, and Richard Burton's star text adds a further layer to Antony's debilitating failure to live up to the expectations others have of him. There was always

something a bit Byronic about Burton, a sense of a tragic and charismatic hero, one that he had put to full effect with his portrayals of other ancient figures, chief among them Alexander the Great in the 1956 film of the same name, in which he played a similarly flawed yet brilliant man, one whose ambitions to unite the world were doomed to fail. The same might be said of Burton's turn as King Arthur in the Broadway version of *Camelot*, in which he is once again a leader condemned to watch the dissolution of all that he has aspired to build as the peace and glory of Camelot is brought low by the scheming of Mordred (also played by Roddy McDowall) and the foolish actions of a pair of lovers. Furthermore, Burton always possessed a charisma that rendered him both aristocratic and proletarian, a man who exuded a powerful yet understated charm. The Burton star persona, even more than that of Elizabeth Taylor, enmeshes in one person dauntless ambition and abject failure.

If the film's narrative constantly focuses on the conflict between zenith and nadir, its form underscores this tension through its oscillation between movement and stasis: at several key points in the film the action freezes and, gradually, fades until it adopts the appearance of a cracked and ancient mosaic, heightening the film's focus on temporal finitude. This pattern emerges quite early in the film, as the credits unfold over images faded almost into abstraction, while melancholy strains of music play in the background. At these moments, the film freezes time, countering the terrifying nature of history's inevitable forward movement toward the death and dissolution, the ostensible *telos* of the Cleopatra myth. At the same time, however, it also paradoxically heightens awareness that this is *the past*, that the future that Cleopatra represents in the film's imagination—the one full of international cooperation, vitality, and beauty—has fallen victim to the tyranny of time. It is, in other words, a potent reminder of the very death that it attempts to subvert. Just as the narrative which encases Cleopatra forecloses on

her ambitions, so do her accomplishments vanish into the gaping maw of time, the worn appearance of the mosaics mute testament to the ravages of history. The beauty and the promise of antiquity lies in ruins.

As the film's second half unfolds, Cleopatra finds herself manipulated into undertaking the very actions that would be most advantageous to Octavian, a point brought forcefully to the fore by Sosigenes (Hume Cronyn). He reminds her that her Roman enemy is always a few steps ahead of her, but by this point she has become so convinced of the rightness and infallibility of her historical vision that she cannot see outside of it. Cleopatra's unwillingness (or inability) to recognize that this vision may be flawed keeps her enmeshed in a steadily-cascading series of decisions that will ultimately lead to her own defeat. Though Sosigenes is correct about will transpire (and thus possesses a historical gaze of his own), his inability to convince Cleopatra of the rightness of it condemns his efforts to failure. The characters continue their headlong plunge toward armed conflict and defeat, ultimately ending up at the pivotal site of Actium.

It is precisely this *telos* of inevitable defeat that renders the Battle of Actium—arguably one of the most decisive battles in antiquity—so central to the melancholic historical experience offered by the film. The sequence takes full advantage of the Todd-AO screen, filling the eye with the paraphernalia of war and conquest, the material wealth that will decide the future of the world. Here, the presence offered by widescreen dovetails with the present-tense of the attraction to create a feeling of time suspended amid infinite possibility. Cleopatra and Antony occupy a contradictory position in this moment: they have the power to decisively defeat Octavian, yet they are also subject to the swift changes of fortune that almost always accompany the great battles of history. It is now, as the entire Mediterranean world waits with anticipation, that the future will be decided. This is also the moment when Cleopatra's historical vision is literalized;



the scope of the spectacle provides the outward sign of Cleopatra's seeming control of her destiny. Cleopatra—like so many of the real-world leaders with whom she is associated—believes that she, along with Antony, can command the course of events.

The repeated shifts in perspective—toggling between Cleopatra, Antony, and Cleopatra's advisers—further literalizes this historical gaze. They believe their access to their privileged knowledge grants them the ability to control the outcome of the battle. However, each character knows something that the others do not, fragmenting the historical gaze so that none of them can see the situation in its totality. Those on the cliff have the vast battlefield laid out before them, and thus understand the brutal logic of the trap that Agrippa has laid by luring Antony behind Octavian's line, a plan made even more explicit by a series of scenes showing the Roman commander explicitly stating his intentions. However, they cannot get that information to Antony, and he heedlessly falls right into the jaws of the snare. The spectator, however, *does* have the unity of vision denied to the characters, and this awareness generates a feeling of commingled powerlessness and agency, heightening the sense of tragedy. On one hand, the film encourages a yearning for a potential future that will be governed not by Octavian and his wanton cruelty but instead by the canniness of Cleopatra and the generosity of spirit that Antony represents. On the other, it forces an acknowledgment that such a vision is doomed. In this moment, Cleopatra's historical gaze fails her and, convinced by her advisers that Antony has fallen (even though he has not), she flees the battlefield, her dreams collapsing into ruin.

Antony, convinced that Cleopatra has lost faith in him (he, of course, does not know the real reason for her flight) throws away his weapons, dives into the sea, and pursues her. In the process, he abandons his own men to a watery grave, their outstretched arms and cries for help a poignant reminder of the tremendous cost of failure. The battle is lost, and Octavian emerges the

victor, over both this battle and (seemingly) over the historical record that will gradually consign Antony and Cleopatra to an ignominious past. The film encourages a feeling of profound sadness at the bitter irony of the battle: if only those characters had possessed an accurate gaze into the future, the outcome—with its burned wreckage and its floating corpses—might have been different. The future would have belonged to the grand lovers rather than the weak and mean-spirited Octavian, who lies sick below-deck, while better men do his fighting for him.

While Antony and Cleopatra represent a union of both the East and the West, the male and the female, Octavian represents the brutal misogynist tribalism that resides at the Roman Empire's sense of self. When, for example, he finally persuades the Senate to declare war on his erstwhile brother-in-law and his new Egyptian spouse, he thrusts a spear into the peaceful sage Sosigenes, who dies with his hands outstretched in supplication. This action, brutally phallic and gratuitous, highlights the fact that for the Romans there can be no rapprochement with the Eastern, female other, a reality further underscored by Octavian's ruthless murder of the child Caesarion and his impassive gaze at the boy's corpse as he rides into Alexandria. The Roman sense of identity is built on conflict and the nationalism of their founder Aeneas rather than the more cosmopolitan view of the future articulated by Cleopatra and her other Roman consorts. Octavian's is a vision more temporally expansive than Cleopatra's: he is the one, after all, who will go down in history as the victor of Actium and the first emperor of Rome. Ultimately, his vision is the one that will dominate the future, while hers is forever cast in amber, an aborted attempt at creating a world that will never be.

As the conclusion unfolds, the screen fills with the spectacle of failure, as when Antony must finally confront the reality that he has fallen too far to recover his fortunes. Several widescreen compositions position him as a lone figure against the vast forces which he cannot

meaningfully challenge. In the first, Antony walks along the beach, a dim figure against the sea upon which he gambled all and lost. In another, the camera zooms out to show him amid his camp, which has been abandoned by his soldiers as they defect to Octavian's advancing army. The following scene shows the fallen general standing alone against these very forces, his pitiful figure in marked contrast to the tide of history that is about to sweep away the last vestiges of his ambition. Time has turned irrevocably against both Antony and Cleopatra, and they can only ride the wave that will carry them to their inevitable deaths.

Despite her efforts to save at least some measure of her planned future, Cleopatra's narrative must end with its fulfilment in her famous suicide. For all that the film's spectacle provides a temporary means of escaping the tyranny of time, it cannot overcome the limitations imposed by this key aspect of the myth. Unlike earlier epics, which at least attempted to overlay their skepticism about a possible future with a superficial layer of triumph, *Cleopatra* renders it visually explicit. One senses here a response to the problems of the early 1960s, when those living in the present seemed caught in an ever-more-intense atmosphere of uncertainty. The Cuban Missile Crisis had brought the world to the brink of all-out war, and the collapse of the old imperial powers had sown the seeds for escalating conflicts throughout the world. The future, which had at first seemed so full of promise and potential with the creation of the United Nations and the supposed rebirth of freedom throughout the world, seemed poised to march again into another cycle of war and conflict, a fear rendered in the cycle of civil war in *Cleopatra*.

In taking her death into her own hands, Cleopatra brings to a definitive end a similar cycle of defeat and victory, civil war and stability. Having decided that she will commit suicide rather than consign herself to humiliation at Octavian's hands, she allows herself to be bitten by the asp and has her attendants clothe her in an outfit visually like the one she wore during her

triumphal entry into Rome. This draws a clear parallel to that earlier moment, suggesting that through her death she will attain a form of immortality that has so frustratingly eluded her. The burdensome weight of the past and future has at last been given up; when she announces that she goes to join Antony, it is as much a confession that she is vacating the stage of history as it is a declaration of her everlasting love. She knows that her son is dead and that the future belongs to Octavian, and so she ensures that her death is one of her *own* choosing. As the camera moves in on a close-up, she proclaims that life, which had been but a dream, will at last be hers, her eyes gazing again into a future, this one not of the world but out of it. She will rest beside Antony until the end of all things.

As the film ends, the camera slowly pulls back from Cleopatra's resplendent body, encased forever in the stillness of death, and gradually the scene fades until it has attained the stasis of the mosaic, a visual echo of that which opened the film (*figure 31 and 32*). Her death is the culmination of her lineage, the inevitable endpoint of a dynasty that had managed to hold onto Egypt since the time of Alexander the Great. The future that the Macedonian conqueror had envisioned and that had motivated Cleopatra throughout the film has faded into a series of abstract shapes, a concept that can never be realized. When Agrippa demands of one of her attendants whether this was well-done of her mistress, she responds that yes, it was a fitting action for one who descended from such a noble lineage. The prestige of the past has found a suitable grave.



*Figure 31 and 32. The end of all Cleopatra's ambitions; the past lies in ruins.*

While her dreams of conquest may have died with her, Cleopatra still manages to exert one final bit of historical clairvoyance. She realizes, even if Octavian does not, that the spectacular means of her death and the memorial that she has raised to herself will ultimately exert an indelible hold on the imaginations of future generations. Her death has forever bound his name with hers, so that his own self-cultivated icon will be associated with the fact that he brought about her downfall, his brutal tribalism in sharp contrast to the more cosmopolitan worldview that she represents. The birth of a new Roman order that his victory inaugurates will always be tainted with the what-might-have-been of Cleopatra's vision. What's more, the Rome

of Augustus, as any good viewer of epics knows, will eventually crumble away into decadence and self-indulgence, bringing Cleopatra's aborted utopia into even sharper relief. Paradoxically, it is in her splendid defeat that Cleopatra has found her greatest victory.

Through its intertwining of contingency and foreclosure, *Cleopatra* expresses the anxieties of American empire. The mission that the United States had taken upon itself—to make the world safer, to continue the forward movement of history toward inevitable betterment—had already begun to show signs of wear by the beginning of the 1960s. While the Camelot ethos surrounding JFK and his administration was still in effect by the time that the film was released, his brutal and shocking assassination later in 1963 would end the possibilities that he had represented in the American imagination. It is precisely because the vision that Cleopatra herself proposes bears such a strong resemblance to both the United Nations and the United States that the film's ending carries such a profound feeling of melancholy. With her death has gone the hope for a future that is better than the one that opened the film, a hope that had promised to anxious audiences the possibility that their world might also be made into a better one. The film opened with the smell of charred Roman corpses and ends with the repose of Cleopatra in the ultimate oblivion of death.

If Cleopatra the historical figure is made to bear the burdens that the United States had already begun to feel as the leader of the free world and the propagator of the ethos of benevolent supremacy, the failure of her ambitions might have seemed to expiate the sins of the present—averting the fear that the United States might go the way of its imperialist predecessors. However, the film's many narrative strands also lay bare a stark reality that so much American myth-making had attempted to sublimate: that the country was not, in fact, a “universal future” toward which the entire world was slowly but inexorably moving (Thompson 40). Instead, it was

as time-bound as any of the great civilizations that preceded it. The fall that had brought them low might just bring the United States to its knees as well.

#### Mourning a Future-That-Never-Was in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

Despite its initial failure among audiences and critics at the time of its release, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* has subsequently gained a significant amount of critical appreciation, particularly among classical scholars. Martin Winkler, in several essays in his edited volume devoted to the film, lays out in detail the reasons why the film should be taken seriously as a work of sophisticated historical writing. He usefully demonstrates how the film provokes a feeling of history akin to the historical works of Gibbon, upon which the film clearly draws in both its title and its narrative (“Edward Gibbon” 145-173).<sup>5</sup> The scholarly consensus in Winkler’s volume and in other writings of the film—such as Maria Wyke’s brief mention of it—is that the film is a largely pessimistic one, in which human agency is at best ineffective and at worst nonexistent (187).

While I agree with Winkler and his fellow classicists in many respects, here I wish to nuance their analysis by demonstrating that it is through its many tensions—between spectacle and narrative; between past and future; and between foresight and blindness—that the film explores the experience of living in the midst of the profound uncertainty of historical time. I argue that spectacle in *Fall of the Roman Empire* provides an experience of history as full of possibility, each moment of spectacular beauty encapsulating the vastness of temporal potentiality—a future that might be. However, this promise remains in tension with the narrative momentum that drives the characters, and the empire, to the *telos* of the end. The utopian future is both perpetually possible and continually foreclosed. Furthermore, through its refusal to

visualize the actual fall of Rome to the barbarians, the film ensures that this ultimate ending remains eternally imminent. The film thus forces an experience of standing on the cusp of time, in the fraction of a second in which the pinnacle of accomplishment is intertwined with the inescapability of its opposite.

Beginning in the year 180 A.D., the film follows the Roman general Livius (Stephen Boyd) as he attempts to fulfill the charge delivered to him by the aging emperor Marcus Aurelius (Alec Guinness). While the emperor has a son, Commodus (Christopher Plummer), he has decided that Livius shall be his heir. This sets up the essential conflict in the film, in which Lucius attempts to propagate and sustain Marcus Aurelius's vision for the future and Commodus remains determined to forge an empire based on his own vision of tribalism and self-centered ambition. Caught between them is the noblewoman Lucilla (Sophia Loren), the sister of the Emperor and the lover of Lucius. The showdown between these two visions of what the Roman Empire should and could be comes to a head when the two male leads duel for their lives. Though Commodus is defeated and killed, Livius opts not to pursue the emperorship, leaving the position to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

By the early 1960s, it had become *de rigueur* to shoot and to exhibit epic films in widescreen, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is no exception. Recall from chapter two that part of the pleasure of widescreen cinema was its ability to provide a feeling of embodied presence, a sense that, as Barthes put it, one stood on the balcony of history. *Fall* partakes of that tradition, and its marketing repeatedly emphasized that the film provides all the conflicted emotions attending the fall of the ancient world's most famous superpower. However, where earlier widescreen epic films emphasized the birth of new civilizations or the fulfillment of history—focusing their narratives around the creation of the state of Israel in *The Ten Commandments* or



the Crucifixion in *The Robe—Fall* comes at and portrays a very different historical moment. This film emerges at a time when the United States, as we have seen, had moved beyond the dominant buoyant ethos that followed victory in World War II, and as a result the widescreen spectacle intertwines the contradictory impulses of optimism and pessimism. Through its use of widescreen spectacularity, the film opens up the grand vista as the literalization of its characters' historical gaze, even as its narrative continues to emphasize the futility of human action in the face of both the crushing weight of the past and the inability to realize the potential of the future.

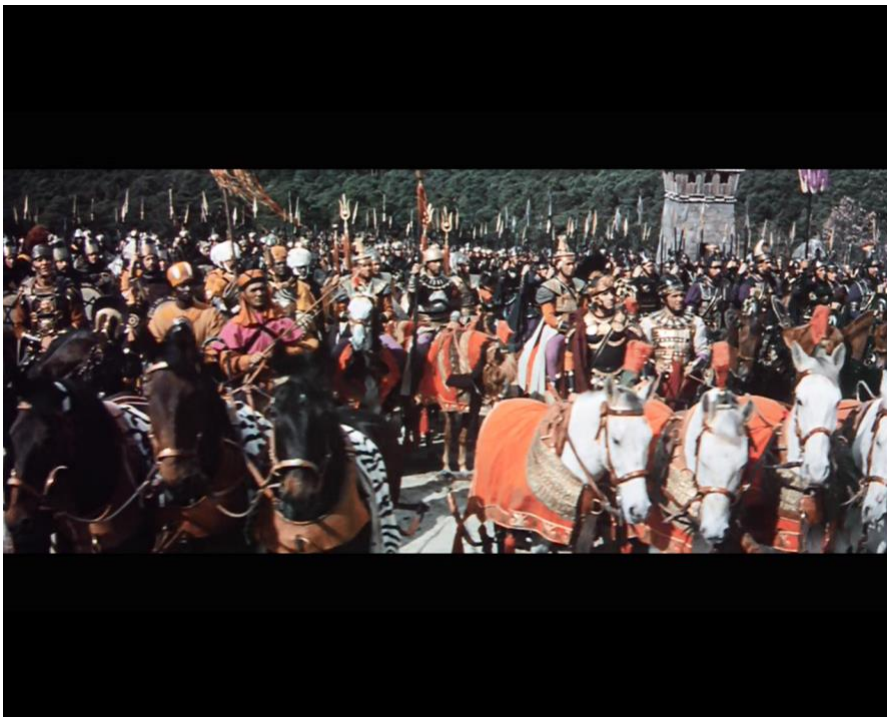
From the outset, *Fall* uses the overwhelming power of spectacle to convey a bleaker vision of both the past and the future than many of its predecessors in the genre. As the detached voiceover that opens the film proposes that the reasons for the fall of the empire were as numerous as their fall, the camera lingers on a forbidding, wintry northern landscape, leached of color, vitality, and energy (*figure 33*). The great fortress that occupies the frame has none of the flush vivacity of the scarlet-caped legions of a *Quo Vadis* or a *Ben-Hur*, but is instead a potent reminder of the herculean effort required to establish this outpost on the very borders of the known world (Fenwick and Green-Armytage 189). Geographically, this is the furthest that the Roman Empire can go. While other emperors sought to expand territorially, Marcus Aurelius expresses a desire for human boundaries, a sense of Roman identity which relies on the idea of universal citizenship rather than the enforcement of violence upon the land and the people.



*Figure 33. The bleakness of imperial overreach.*

Having established the vast landscape against which the most important actions of the film will unfold, the next scene focuses in on an exchange between the aged and ailing Emperor Marcus Aurelius and his adviser Timonides (James Mason). This conversation is an important moment, revealing a structuring tension in the film. Beset by an ominous augury and by the bleak German landscape, Marcus ruminates that death frequently strikes in the hour just before dawn, when darkness is about to give way to light. In that moment of infinite potential, it is just as likely that the end will come as it is that a new day will dawn. Timonides, however, prefers to ruminate on the many good things that life offers, such as warmth and joy, the benefits that will come with a new day. Ultimately, as the film unfolds, it is not only the emperor, but the vision that he represents, that will be carried away by the darkness, while Timonides, for a time at least, will stand for all the promises that are the best that Rome (at least as an ideal concept) can provide before meeting his own tragic death.

While a significant visual bleakness marks most of the film's early scenes, a very different aesthetic marks Aurelius' delivered address to the gathered chieftains that he has summoned to the ends of the empire. The screen fills with the bodies and chariots of the gathered representatives, bursts of color, movement, and energy rendering visible both the emperor's vision for the future and the film's attempt to solve the geopolitical problems of the present and their consequences for the future. Here, for a glorious moment, the precipice of chaos upon which the world seems to totter is resolved in splendor, cooperation, and joy. The film's widescreen aesthetics and director Anthony Mann's meticulous attention to visual detail engender a pleasurable complementarity between the whole and the individual. The chieftains that hail from the far-flung corners of the Empire represent the best that it has to offer, and all of them are willing to become part of an aggregate that is stronger than the sum of its parts (*figure 34*).



*Figure 34. The utopian spectacle of the gathered chieftains.*

The speech that Aurelius subsequently delivers is similar both to Cleopatra's when she visits Caesar in the tomb of Alexander and to that of John F. Kennedy when he spoke in Berlin in 1963 (Cyrino 152).<sup>6</sup> This speech buttresses the utopian ethos of the spectacle. Aurelius' vision looks forward to a future not yet realized but now imminent, and he proclaims that they stand at last on the cusp a new moment in history, looking into a future full of centuries of golden peace. It is significant that the emperor is positioned above the representatives and that the camera largely remains with this perspective; the vista of the gathered peoples literalizes his utopian historical gaze. Both the emperor and the spectator stand on the balcony of history. Further, the fact that this vision of international cooperation remains imminent rather than realized means that they must continue to work to materialize it. That they have come together in this remote outpost of the empire suggests that the union that has eluded Rome and her subject people can at last be brought to fruition, but only if they have the desire, leadership, and the work ethic to make it so.<sup>7</sup>

However, in keeping with the narrative patterning that will structure the rest of the film, a sense of melancholy punctuates this moment, which is both a beginning *and* an end. The film has already made clear that Marcus Aurelius' time has grown short: his body has begun to fail him, and he has already made plans for his death and the succession. This moment of spectacle thus encourages a feeling of conjoined possibility and foreclosure. It is an instant just before the dawn of a new era, in which two distinct possibilities seem equally likely. Either the Roman Empire will continue on the trajectory that will lead to peace and amity among the peoples or it will fall back into a brutal tribalism that will ultimately be its undoing.

The events that follow set up the conflict that will eventually tear the empire apart. While Aurelius intends his throne to pass to the general Livius so that his dream of a better future will

come to fruition, Commodus has his own ambitions, aided and abetted by those in the emperor's circle who want the power for themselves. The wise emperor may have the foresight to see the potential the future holds for both Rome and those who embrace its way of life, but there are others in his entourage who do not. Indeed, it is the blind seer Cleander (Mel Ferrer) who is responsible for Aurelius' poisoning by apple, his own short-sighted political ambitions hamstringing the utopian goals of the old emperor. His historical gaze is a fundamentally flawed one, and the whole Roman Empire suffers for it.

The aged emperor struggles against his knowledge that his death is imminent—he utters an anguished cry to be granted more time in which to bring his historical vision to bear—but, like Julius Caesar, he remains a victim of both history's relentless forward movement and the machinations that take place without his knowledge. Thus, while he attempts to bypass his son Commodus because of his unfitness for the throne and bestow it on Livius, his inability to clearly see the present around him short-circuits his historical vision. His actions, though they *are* the wise thing to do, inadvertently trigger the “patently Oedipal structure” that will lead to the inevitable collapse of his ambitions and the Roman Empire itself (Conley 157). The men and women that follow in his wake are not up to the task of staving off the utter ruination of the aging emperor's utopian vision.

When Marcus Aurelius succumbs to the poisoned apple, the subsequent funeral serves as a negative visual and aural echo of the earlier scene of the gathered chieftains. The screen fills with the bodies of the mourning soldiers, their grieving chants gradually increasing in volume, an uncanny reminder of what has been lost. The fortress, which before had been the scene of joy and optimism at the vision Marcus Aurelius articulated, has become a mausoleum, the tomb of both the emperor and the bright and glorious future that he envisioned. Death has swept away all

in its wake, a fulfillment of the emperor's comment that the moment just before dawn is the most perilous. Commodus, in a further negative echo of his father's earlier position, looks out over a far bleaker future than his predecessor. While the flames leap up around Marcus Aurelius, smoke pours skyward, a harbinger of the chaos and bloodshed that lie ahead (*figure 35*).



*Figure 35. The dreams of Marcus Aurelius are reduced to ashes and dust.*

This bleak, despairing vision is immediately followed, however, by Commodus's triumphal entry into Rome, which emerges as another site of utopianizing pleasure, a signature moment in which the anxieties of empire are simply overwhelmed by the power of the spectacle. As such, it serves as a narrative and visual counterpoint to the speech given by Marcus in the frozen north. The screen fills with the pure presence of the widescreen attraction, a moment when history seems to reach its fulfillment under the new reign of Commodus. Bright reds, crisp lighting, stately processions, and cheering crowds heighten the sense of unfettered joy. While Elena Theodorakopoulos argues that this moment lacks an emotional center because it does not

focus on an individual, I would argue instead that it is precisely the loss of the individual amid the mass spectacle that renders this moment pleasurable (92). This is an instant when anything seems possible because the burdens of the individual are swept away, when Commodus's historical gaze still seems predicated on a blissful future of plenty, energy, and splendor rather than on division and decay. This moment exemplifies the utopianizing dreamscape theorized by Gaines, the widescreen aesthetics encouraging an embrace of the moment of infinite opportunity. This is the balcony of history upon which anything seems possible (*figure 36*).



*Figure 36. The utopian pleasures of Commodus' entry into Rome.*

This utopian sensibility is reflected in the reconstruction of the Forum that was such a significant part of both the film's production and which featured so prominently in the promotion of the film. At one level, the meticulous grandness of this architectural accomplishment partakes in the epic tradition of spending enormous sums on recreating the most imposing structures from the ancient world. In doing so, these films suggested that the powers of Hollywood were such

that civilizations that had fallen victim to history's forward movement could be brought back to life through the magic of the studio system. At a deeper level, this enormous investment in the re-creation of the Forum offers a solution to the inevitability of temporal decay. These reconstructions represent a political world at the height of its powers. The fact that images of this new Forum were often extracted from the narrative and immobilized in the pages of magazines and other promotional material further suggests a desire to freeze time, to save human accomplishments from the ravages of time (Wyke 186).

In Commodus's Rome, however, brutality quickly replaces cooperation, and in that sense the new emperor possesses a historical gaze that is coded as negative and ultimately self-destructive. Whereas his father wanted to build upon the past to create an empire built out of cooperation, Commodus sees Rome's future in a very different light. He accurately understands that Rome is the preeminent power in the world, but his gaze does not allow him to see that it has already reached its apex. The only way forward is down. Deluded by his own seeming omniscience, he fails to understand a fundamental paradox at the heart of Rome: that her strength is also her weakness. As Ward W. Briggs, Jr. puts it, the empire "is so powerful that it is helpless against its own corruption" (240). Unfortunately, the new emperor's historical myopia sends him down a path paved with bloody oppression and, ultimately, human sacrifice.

As Timonides puts it in a moving soliloquy before the Senate, Rome has been ensnared by a vicious spirit of tribalism. The rapaciousness of this conquering people will ultimately sow the seeds of its own destruction at the hands of disgruntled German tribes who have been by turns assaulted and insulted. The vision of Rome articulated by Marcus Aurelius and maintained by Livius and Timonides, by contrast, represents an opportunity to move into a new future not bound by the dictates of the past. Anything might be possible in a Rome where Commodus is



emperor, except for the fact that he remains uninterested in rapprochement with the Germans or others who have resisted the authority of the Roman state.

The rhetoric of strength articulated by Commodus and his cronies is further juxtaposed to the wisdom of the wise Senator played by Finlay Currie, and the latter's speech to the gathered Senate about the necessity of broadening the empire rather than contracting it is both stirring and somber. This nameless senator announces that he has served under the best emperors that Rome has produced, and this grants his words the weight of past understanding. His is a historical gaze that looks backward as well as forward, seeking to use the past as a guide to the future. The fact that he is played by the veteran actor Currie—known for his roles in epic films such as the apostle Peter in *Quo Vadis*, the magi Balthasar in *Ben-Hur*, and the aged King David in *Solomon and Sheba*—grants his words an extra layer of dignity and import (Winkler "A Critical Appreciation" 40-42). If the Senate and the emperor go along with his advice, the entire empire can move forward into a brighter future; this is another pivotal moment when anything seems possible. Ultimately, of course, those who have power in this world remain fatally short-sighted, and the empire is doomed to enter another cycle of repression, brutality, and conquest.

However, the film still holds out moments of utopian possibility, for example in the encounter when Lucius visits the commune of Germans founded by Timonides. Full of brightness and cheer, the settlement is the best of what both worlds, that of the ancient and established Romans and the upstart but vivacious Germans, can bring to one another. As Timonides remarks, anything is possible with the human spirit. In a later scene, Timonides proclaims that at last the future that the old emperor had predicted is coming to pass, realized in the community that has sprung up and in the happy incorporation of the Germanic tribes into the

borders—both literal and metaphorical—of the empire. They may not have yet adopted the ways of their conquerors, but they are well on their way to doing so.

Despite his proclamation of the success of their mission and his belief that it could be replicated the whole world over, that future is not possible in the world of this film. This utopian vision remains foreclosed upon by the short-sightedness of Commodus and those who see brutal strength as the only way for Rome to both maintain its preeminent position and ascend ever higher. The end continues to press in upon these beautiful moments, and the emperor's ruthless command that they be exterminated falls like a thunderbolt upon the gathered people amid their joyous celebration, feasting, and dancing. Timonides, the voice of reason and the man whose historical gaze accurately predicts that the tide of German rage will bring Rome to its knees in future generations, is struck down by a Roman spear. Like Sosigenes, he has been sacrificed on the altar of short-sighted political ambition. With his death, the glorious future that Marcus Aurelius envisioned and which Livius could have perpetuated had he the strength of will to do so, has been brought to a violent end. The empire itself shall soon follow him.

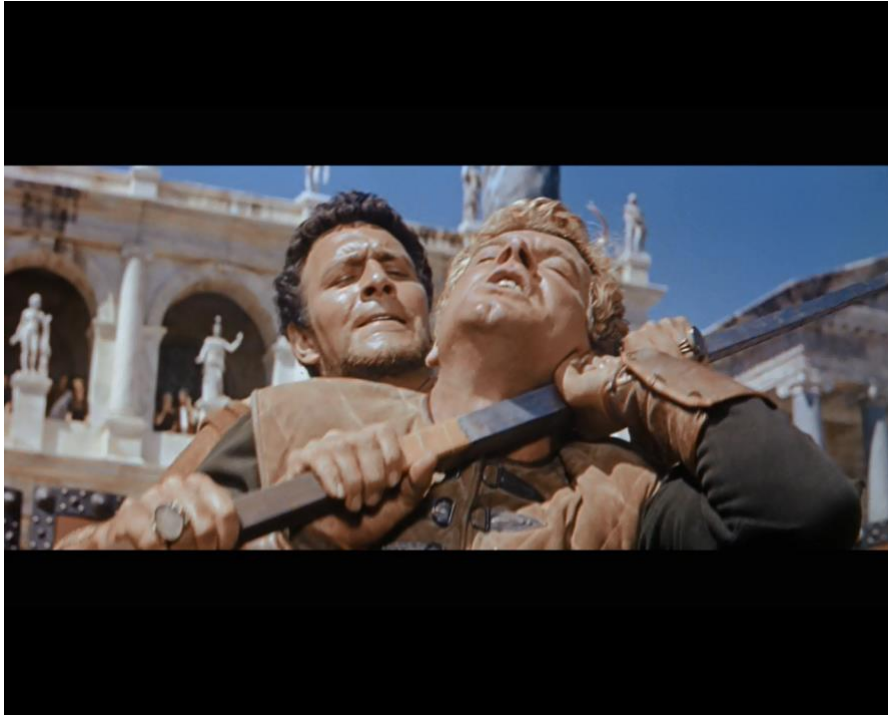
Commodus meanwhile continues his attempt to enforce his own violent historical vision on the citizenry of Rome and on the rest of its dominions. He frequently strides across a map set into the Senate floor, a man who has in his power the ability to reshape the world in his own image. Whereas Marcus Aurelius's earlier appearance in front of a map of the empire conveyed the aged emperor's ability to gaze into the future with an understanding of the international cooperation that would make Rome flourish for many centuries to come, Commodus's is a much grander yet far more misguided understanding of space and time (Conley 152-155). The younger emperor sees himself as a literal colossus bestriding the world, bringing all of time and space under his control. However, his megalomania prevents him from seeing his own slide into

madness and the danger this poses for the empire that he seeks to rule. As a result, the mad emperor folds into his person Rome's tremendous strength and its greatest weakness.

Eventually, Commodus manages to have himself declared divine, and the entire city turns out in full force to join in the celebration of his new status. These final scenes are an orgy of utopian delights, the people of Rome utterly abandoned to the sadistic joy of celebration. However, this is a significantly bleaker sort of utopian spectacle, the calm before the storm. Lucilla herself knows this, and she becomes a lonely Cassandra ignored by the populace, even as she cries for the crowd to "Mourn for the land that is no more." Though Rome still exists in a material sense, it has already begun its descent into darkness, exposing the reality that even in the midst of joy lies great sorrow. The utopian spectacle of celebration—of gathered bodies, frenzied energy, intense joy—remains inextricably intertwined with its opposite, the grisly sight of the Germans bound and awaiting their execution, the futility of human action, the bleak despair of an end both imminent and immanent.

In his madness, Commodus challenges Livius to a duel, and while at first this might seem to offer the chance for the hero to symbolically reclaim his own agency and save the empire from itself, it too remains punctured by futility.<sup>8</sup> The vastness of the Panavision screen has been restricted to the tiny arena of shields in which this climactic fight is conducted, the infinite temporal and spatial potential represented by widescreen and by the film's earlier uses of spectacle has become restricted to a mere fight for life (*figure 37*).<sup>9</sup> This is not a duel that will have far-reaching consequences should Livius win—there will be no Christian redemption, no restoration of the male self, no remaking of the body politic—but instead one in which the result will simply be survival. The future is already foreclosed by the fact that the empire has brought itself to the brink of collapse through its inability to contain Commodus's megalomania. The

scene is marked by its aural sparseness—for almost its entirety the duel is characterized only by the grunts of the combatants and the discordant shriek of their metal weapons striking the stone—and by the ongoing attempts of those standing outside to turn this duel to their advantage.

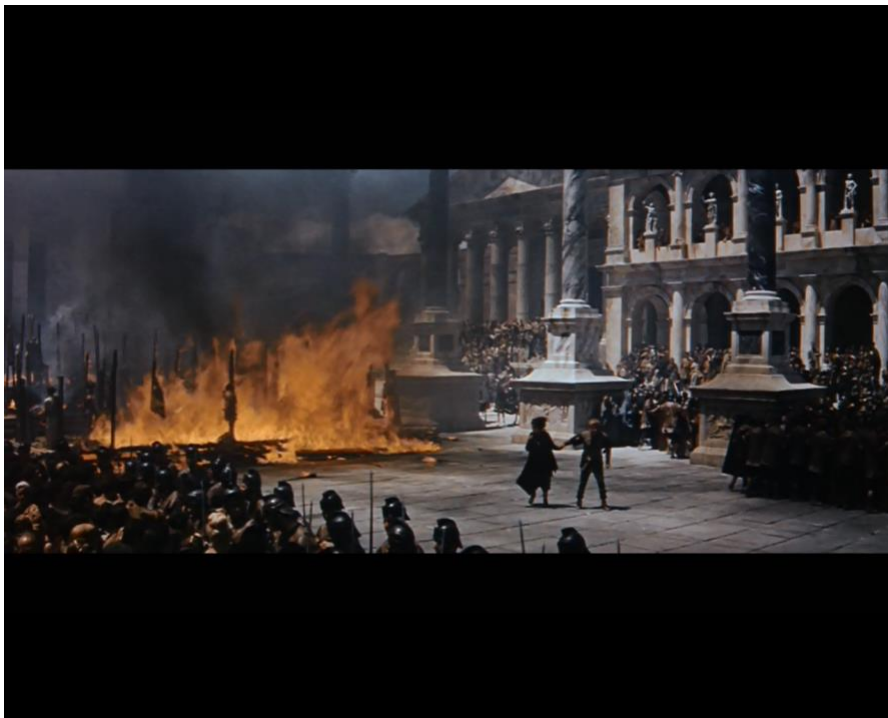


*Figure 37. The agonized fight for life itself, shown in the constricted intimacy of widescreen.*

Commodus's death is similarly understated. Mann's penchant for stressing the physical intimacy and conflict among men keeps both combatants in stiflingly close contact, until at last Lucius can deliver the death-blow. As he gasps his last breath, Commodus utters a strangled cry commanding his men to burn the Germans. In this final moment of madness and megalomania, Commodus also has a form of the historical gaze, and he realizes that his actions will bring about the downfall of the Empire that he believes is so strong. With his dying cry, he succeeds at last in bringing to fruition his own twisted vision. If Rome will not be saved, then it will burn.

As the city erupts into chaos—punctuated by the flames that consume the captive Germans and senators—Livius and Lucilla flee, as if they are two biblical figures escaping from

a universal conflagration (Conley 147). While she looks back in dismay at the flames consuming the square, the camera zooms out, showing two tiny figures overwhelmed by the collapse of Marcus Aurelius' dream (*figure 38*). At this point, Livius seeks nothing more than to escape the rottenness and corruption that have swept over everything. The future has become a bleak wasteland, the tide of history bearing down to sweep the tiny humans into the dustbin of the past. The final shot of the film is of the expanse of the city, a tendril of smoke drifting skyward, a final reminder of the funeral pyre of utopia.



*Figure 38. Livius and Lucilla flee the collapse of empire, like Lot and his wife fleeing from God's wrath.*

At first glance, it might seem that the ending of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is at least slightly more sanguine than *Cleopatra*. The two characters, after all, manage to survive the great conflagration consuming the edifice of the Roman Empire. However, in many ways the opposite is true. There may be a future for the two characters in this film to inhabit, but it is their doom to stand by and watch the empire collapse into ruin. "The End" appears over a drawing of a small

figure, hunched beneath the crumbled ruins of ancient Rome's glorious past, suggesting that this narrative has a bearing on, not just Rome, but the western civilization of which Rome is the progenitor (Conley 157). As with the fresco that ends *Cleopatra*, this still image provides a stasis, a sense of solidity that in some measure contains the pressure of an eternally deferred and imminent ending that accompanied the film's final narrative turn (*figure 39*). It is, however, a stasis that bears with it the crushing weight of the past. History has become a physical force, a brooding and implacable burden that cannot be shaken off.



*Figure 39. The end of all things.*

In its ending, the film expresses a melancholic utopia similar to that of *Cleopatra*, embodying Livia's query to her father near the beginning of the film. She asks him, "Is that the way it must be, father? Only moments of beauty, and then betrayal?" The world of Rome that the film has created with such exactness—one in which there was a brief, transient moment of political cooperation, of beauty and splendor that was the Empire at the height of its powers—

has been swept away by the inexorable forward movement of historical time and the failings of the historical gaze. Indeed, the film argues, there are only brief moments of beauty in the world, and they are always tainted by an awareness of the betrayal that inevitably accompany them. Their beauty is rendered all the more poignant and melancholic as a result.

The spectacle that seemed to hold collapse at bay has, in this film, only rendered the loss more acute, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* argues that even the most beautiful things must in the end collapse and fade. It is perhaps fitting that this film emerged in the middle of the 1960s, when the great dream that had been Kennedy's Camelot had already begun to fade into memory, replaced by the escalating tensions of Vietnam and the disillusionment of the latter part of the decade. The loss of agency that concludes this film serves as a form of release, a sense of resignation at history's relentless circularity. If all that remains in the future is a fall that cannot be averted, then it absolves the individual from the need to do anything to prevent it. *Fall* suggests that there can be a certain amount of pleasure to be taken in simply abandoning oneself to the relentless tide of historical time.

#### Conclusion: The End, or the Beginning of History?

"History on film," the historian Robert Rosenstone writes, "[...] seems to be about the loss of control; loss of sense; loss," (235-236). The experience of history offered by the epic film is also about loss, as the world envisioned by the main characters at the beginning is utterly lost to the ravages of time. Despite the sense of promise and presence held out by spectacle, the irreversible nature of historical time punctures this utopian allure. While emphasis on loss would seem to bear an entirely negative connotation, and while many of the critics and scholars have tended to read them this way, as I have demonstrated there is a more complex set of pleasures to

be gleaned from these films. Produced in a period in which “optimism and pessimism vied for dominance of the American spirit,” they provide a conjoined feeling of possibility (the world might be better) with a dreadful certainty (the promise will never be fulfilled) (George 5).

These films thus possess a poignant sort of beauty that provides at least a momentary escape from the seemingly inescapable nature of historical time and the sense of inevitable decline and conflict that characterized the early 1960s. As Ruiz notes, the experience of the beautiful that takes one away from the quotidian realities of living in the midst of historical time can, paradoxically, heighten one’s awareness of that unfortunate reality (140). He goes on to say that “all art is a struggle against the passing of time” (156). The moments of spectacular beauty that emerge in these films encode into their form the aspirations of a world struggling against the seemingly inexorable slide back into conflict and factionalism, even as they acknowledge the inevitability of such a decline. Cleopatra and Marcus Aurelius might envision a utopian world similar to that sought by the United Nations but, like their counterparts in the modern world, those aspirations were ultimately doomed.

Unlike other films discussed in this dissertation—which hold out at least a promise of a better world-to-come—the endings of both *Cleopatra* and *Fall of the Roman Empire* render quite explicit the demise of golden age ambitions. These films warn about the channeling of utopian desires into the hands of deeply-flawed individuals who ultimately find their agency foreclosed upon by the forces of history that they seek to control. However, this foreclosure is itself an unsettlingly pleasurable form of release from the burdens of history. By the end, no longer must the characters continue waging wars they cannot win and staging spectacles that highlight the inevitable foreclosure of their utopian ambitions; instead, they are able to consign their destinies to either their own, individual death (as is the case with *Cleopatra*) or the inevitable and now-



imminent death of the empire that they have tried to save (as in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*). The epic confronts the unsettling possibility of a lapse back into political chaos and ultimately forces a confrontation with the very demise it has temporarily kept at bay. The tension between the utopianizing dream and the pressures of Cold War historical realities has at last been discharged into the sublime pleasure of an ending.

## Conclusion

Produced in an era in which the present remained perilously suspended between the traumas of the past and an increasingly uncertain future, the historico-biblical epic utilized the powers of film to engage with the pressures of the atomic age. In particular, the genre contended with what has been theorized as the “terror of history,” the sense that the linear movement of historical time has become synonymous with a march toward inevitable annihilation. The epic sublimates this existential threat into a series of dualisms: between agency and impotence, transcendence and embodiment, desire and death, imperial zenith and nadir. I have shown how, rather than resolving its contradictions into a coherent ideological whole by privileging one of these terms over the other, these films refuse (or are unable) to do so. Through these irresolvable, endlessly productive tensions, the epic conjoins the escape from the terror of history with an experience of it.

Chapter one demonstrated how the pressures of imminent extinction placed pressure on the concept of human agency, which came to occupy a contradictory place in postwar America and in the epic film. Just as humanity had seemed to appropriate the powers of the divine but had in doing so become subject to forces it could not ultimately control, so ancient heroes such as Spartacus and Moses, though they direct the destinies of their chosen people, remain subservient to forces—God, a sacrificial destiny, history—that they cannot resist. Chapter two focused on the ways in which the reintroduction of widescreen filmmaking into Hollywood with CinemaScope and the historico-biblical epic *The Robe* engendered a contradictory experience of time, at once deeply embodied and simultaneously transcendent. The new process promised spectators the ability to escape the boundedness of their own historical location and witness the fulfillment

represented by the Crucifixion even as it also subjected them to the forward movement of historical, narrative time. Chapter three argued that the epic responded to the pressures and imperatives of the immediate postwar period—an endangered future, a traumatized past, a drive toward consumerism, disruptive female desire—with the unruly, perilous pleasures of Technicolor. The vibrant color palettes of films such as *Samson and Delilah* collapse the distinction between desire and death, wedding together sexuality and spectacular violence. And chapter four argued that the final epic films of the midcentury cycle, including the (in)famous *Cleopatra*, expressed a form of melancholic utopia, a mourning for a world that is a potential that can never be realized.

The strategies by which the epic attempts to ameliorate the terror of living in the midst of historical time ultimately forces an encounter with it. Thus, simmering beneath the triumphalist surface of these films is an awareness of the horrors entailed in the forward march of modern history and an even more unsettling sense of uncertainty about whether a human future in the atomic age was possible or, for that matter, desirable. In that sense, the epic was one of those genres—such as *film noir*, science fiction, and the melodrama—perfectly poised to capture the angst of the Cold War, and this matching between milieu and genre may go a long way toward explaining its tremendous financial success throughout the first two decades after World War II. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the genre had clearly entered its final days, and the release of John Huston's *The Bible: In the Beginning*, though the top box office draw of 1966, was the last of the epic religious spectacles.

The film details the events of the Old Testament Book of Genesis, including the Garden of Eden, the collapse of the Tower of Babel, the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and concludes with the Binding of Isaac. Released a mere few months after *Time* asked, “Is God

Dead?” on its cover, *The Bible* grapples with the increasingly distant figure of a God who recedes into history, even as his influence and purpose—deadly, capricious, and frequently unknowable—continues to be felt. However, precisely because he remains invisible and increasingly divorced from the reality of the film, his demands upon his followers become ever more associated with the brutal vicissitudes of living in forward-moving historical time. God may not be dead in this film, but those subject to the barbarous whims of this angry deity might wish that he were. As Stephen Farber writes of *The Bible*’s final sequence (the aborted sacrifice of Isaac): “Huston uses vast panoramas most effectively in this sequence to suggest the loneliness and precariousness of men against the power of an indifferent natural world and its ‘benevolent’ God” (13).<sup>1</sup>

Though antiquity would maintain a presence in popular media of the next few decades, it was not until 2000, and the release of Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator*, that the historico-biblical epic enjoyed a period of prominence resembling its midcentury peak. In the years since *Gladiator*, the ancient world has proliferated in film and television, with varying degrees of success. Both *Rome* (2005-2007) and *Spartacus* (2010-2013) garnered devoted fandoms for their networks HBO and Starz, respectively, and there have been at least two major television miniseries based on the Bible, *The Bible* (2013) and *A.D.: The Bible Continues* (2015) (both of which aired on the History Channel).<sup>2</sup> There have also been several high-profile epic films about antiquity, including *Troy* (2004), *Alexander* (2004), and *300* (2007), as well as several admittedly less successful—and smaller-scoped—forays into antiquity, such as *Centurion* (2010), *The Eagle* (2011), *Pompeii* (2014), and others. With the exception of Mel Gibson’s wildly successful *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), the first big-budget historico-biblical epics of the millennial cycle tended to focus more on the “historico” than on the “biblical.” Films such as *Noah* (2014),

*Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *Risen* (2016), and *Ben-Hur* (2016), however, brought the biblical back into the epic film.

These millennial films however, confront a very different set of historical and political realities than their predecessors, a period in which American might had come under increasing strain and in which its imperial hegemony was threatened by rapid globalization. One can see such anxieties emerge in *Gladiator*, which centers its narrative of a corrupt Roman Empire which must be symbolically rejuvenated through the abjection and ultimate death of its male hero Maximus. As Robert Burgoyne and others have demonstrated, the film very much partakes of its cultural moment, critiquing both the shortcomings of American empire and providing a symbolic resolution to the problems that it has posed. There is, Burgoyne argues, a “sense of foreboding and crisis” about the film, and the film seems to foreshadow the events of September 11, 2001 and the “crisis of national identity and modern social structures” that followed” (86).<sup>3</sup>

Most the films of the millennial epic cycle, indeed, were released after the events of September 11 and the subsequent War on Terror, in which the eastern other was figured as a dire threat to the stability (and impenetrability) of the western male. As a result, many of the epic films that emerged from this period contended with the question of the Middle East and its role in modernity. An interest in the Levant was, as we have seen, a feature of many of the films in the midcentury cycle as well, and in those films the region is largely a site upon and through which American interests are articulated. One can see this in the concern for the nascent nation of Israel in, for example, *Solomon and Sheba* which has its opening voiceover proclaim that the region of the Middle East has been the site of conflicts between warring nations since ancient times. Or *The Ten Commandments* which, Alan Nadel contends, “performs on that eastern site what Michel de Certeau identifies as the basic act of colonization—creating a discourse that

makes the other the same” (418). He goes on to note that in flattening out this difference, “*The Ten Commandments* reclaims the Middle East not as a Jewish homeland but as part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, that is, the American sphere of influence” (427).

The millennial films take a much more explicit interest in the fraught and volatile relationship between Europe and Asia, West and East, situating their narratives at precisely those historical junctures in which the two cultures have come into violent contact. What’s more, they also focus much more explicitly on the otherness of the east, and their narratives frequently center on western men coming into conflict with their eastern counterparts: the European Greeks attack the walled eastern city of Troy (in *Troy*); Alexander with his armies determine to finally conquer Persia and bring the world under the dominion of the Aristotelian west and its brutal, xenophobic logic (in *Alexander*); and the Spartans stage an hysterically violent assault against the forces of darkness, embodied in the hordes of Persians and their monstrous god-king Xerxes (in *300*). The latter film is particularly noteworthy as an inversion of the west-invading-the-east dynamic, for it is the eastern other that threatens the stability and integrity of the western body.

All three of these films fetishize the heroic male body and, like their midcentury predecessors, use new film technologies (in this case CGI) to provide “an affectively exciting and intensely embodied spectatorship” of the ancient world (Thompson 56). However, while these technological marvels certainly engender a feeling of wonder in the bodies and sensoria of millennial spectators, they also frequently demonstrate the fragility of the male body, its vulnerability (and destructibility) in the orgies of violence that so frequently accompany these new forays into the ancient world epic. Antiquity thus continues to serve as a site of both wonder and terror for both those in the diegesis and those spectators who are encouraged to experience this strange, inherently violent dreamscape. Just as importantly, these newer epic narratives

remain predicated on death as the endpoint toward which the narrative inevitably moves. Imperialist masculinity is, in these films, literally a dead end.

*Troy*, the first post-*Gladiator* epic film, uses the mythic template of Homer's *The Iliad* to interrogate the fraught territory between various forms of masculinity, most of which are deeply toxic, dysfunctional, and deficient.<sup>4</sup> Such is certainly the case with Agamemnon (Brian Cox) the bellicose Greek king who wishes to bring nothing but ruin to a culture that the film paints as both older and more advanced than his own, and it is even true of Achilles (Brad Pitt), whose particularly arrogant performance of masculinity leads him inevitably to his death. The Trojans have their own emblem of heroic masculinity in the person of Hector (Eric Bana) who, like Achilles, is doomed to die because of his adherence to the old code of epic male heroism. At the end of the film Troy is engulfed in flames, a funeral pyre for the traditional heroic masculinity that has led these two great powers of the Mediterranean into a clash of civilizations from which neither can escape. The fact that it is Paris (Orlando Bloom), diminutive and decidedly unheroic, who manages to escape the destruction of his home signals the millennial epic's fundamental distrust of the older male epic model so ferociously on display with the martial, imperialist exploits of men like Achilles and Hector. Further, the film suggests that the western attempt to penetrate the eastern other remains doomed to failure, with death as the reward for the relentless territorial aggression represented by the Greeks.

At first glance, *Alexander*—which focuses on the Macedonian general's attempts to build a world that is not bound by the old divisions that have kept Europe and Asia entangled in a vicious cycle of never-ending war—seems more progressive and optimistic in its intentions. Alexander, unlike his father Philip, wishes to see Persia and Greece brought together in a union predicated on each civilization taking the best of the other in a productive fusion. This mission,

as positive as it seems (and as angelic as Colin Farrell appears, with his golden locks), is not only premised on an exoticizing Orientalism; it is also doomed to failure by the death that is the *telos* toward which the Alexander myth must always move.<sup>5</sup> When he dies, the fragile peace that he has managed to piece together will fall apart, each of his friends and battle commanders carving out a piece for themselves. White imperialism, while lauded as a noble venture throughout the film, nevertheless reveals the cracks in its own construction.

Even *300*, the most jingoistic (one might even call it fascist) of the millennial cycle, betrays an obsession with the demise of the imperialist heroic ideal. There is, for example, an exquisite embrace of death at the end of the film, when the camera dwells with an almost prurient interest on the mass of dead Spartans, their bodies rendered ecstatically beautiful, like so many Saint Sebastians pierced by the phallic arrows of the invading Persians. The fact that these Persians remain undefeated at the end of the film—which ends with battle between the east and west about to be joined once again—adds a faint note of ambiguity to what has otherwise been a form of glamorized revenge porn, a reclamation of western, able-bodied, white agency from the hands of the demonic, hypersexualized, black and brown bodies who have posed a threat to both the body corporeal and the body politic. The Spartan saga must, as the historical record makes clear, end in the deaths of those who have set out so bravely against the threat of tyranny.

While some have read the deaths of these epic figures as the pinnacle of heroism—the triumphalist trumpeting of the resurgence of muscular, imperialist masculinity—I would argue that, taken in conjunction with the perceived decline in the status of the United States as a superpower, they instead force an acknowledgment of the ultimate failures and flaws of that older male model and the imperial ambitions it has made possible.<sup>6</sup> As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the ancient world epic provides a means of experiencing the terror of history,



and these new epics seem particularly concerned with moments of crisis after which there can be no recovery for the male protagonists. Through their intensity—visual, embodied, and narrative—these films force an experience of the radical dissolution of epic heroism in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As Robert Rushing notes of Maximus in *Gladiator*, in these new films it is always too late for the epic hero, his ultimate failure a structural lack for which the epic can never fully compensate (25-26).<sup>7</sup>

While, except for *The Passion of the Christ*, the ancient world epics of the millennial cycle focused on secular narratives, this began to change in the early 2010s, with the release of such biblical (and quasi-biblical) films as *Noah*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, and the soon-to-be-infamous *Ben-Hur*. These new films, like their secular counterparts, also engaged with the pressing questions of the time, particularly a critique of an older heroic model of imperialist masculinity and, somewhat surprisingly, the racial politics of antiquity. In *Ben-Hur*, for example, the new Judah is a far softer hero than his predecessor in the 1950s—a fact that several reviewers pointed out—and the film takes great pains to depict the Romans as a colonizing force that does everything in its power to wreak bodily havoc on Middle Eastern bodies. And, while the two primary leads (Jack Huston and Toby Kebbell) of the film are white, Sheikh Ilderim is played by Morgan Freeman (as opposed to his 1959 iteration, where he was played by Hugh Griffith in brownface). What's more, this sheikh is a man embittered by his experiences with the crushing imperial mission of Rome, a conqueror that has brutally murdered his own son. When the chariot race is won, it is as much an indictment of the imperial power of Rome as it is a triumph of Judah against the man who betrayed him. And when the two heroes ultimately reunite, it is a similar critique of the older film's ethos, which ensured that one of the two male figures had to die in order for the other to emerge triumphant.

A similar critique of traditional historico-biblical epic conventions emerged in Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, though in that film it centered explicitly around the issue of race. While telling fundamentally the same story as DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, Scott's film visualizes God as a petulant, demanding child whose whims dominate the unwilling prophet Moses and who remains invisible to the other characters. More importantly, the fact that Scott cast the white actor Christian Bale to play Moses ignited a significant amount of criticism for the white-washing of this ancient Levantine figure, and the director's tone-deaf response did little to ameliorate the critiques.<sup>8</sup> Nor was the film well-regarded in Middle Eastern countries, and it would later be condemned in Egypt due to its "Zionist" sensibilities (Gladstone n.p.n.).<sup>9</sup> The criticisms lodged against the film reveal the extent to which the older model of historico-biblical epic filmmaking has been transformed by the far more globalized culture that has emerged since the genre hit its peak in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Further, the "universal" whiteness that characterized the midcentury epic—and the American dominance that it signified—no longer possesses the hegemony that it did in the years immediately following World War II.

While these films have not enjoyed the same sort of cultural (and financial) prominence of their predecessors, their narratives nevertheless reveal the extent to which the epic as a genre remains a flexible one, capable of contending with the various pressures of living in (post)modernity even if, as the *Exodus* incident illustrates, it remains very much a product of Hollywood.<sup>10</sup> Rather than understanding them as transparent allegories of contemporary concerns, however, there is much work yet to be done to explore the ways in which this genre of films, despite its diminished cultural presence and prestige, still manages to capture and express the contradictory social energy of angst and uncertainty, celebration and triumph, that are so essential to the experience of living in the midst of uncertain historical times. While the atomic

threat had receded far into the background by the time that this cycle began, it is entirely possible that, should new epics continue to be made, they may also have to contend with the possibility that the end of human history may once more be at hand. The Middle East continues to be a flash point for the catastrophic failures of American-led imperialism, and atomic anxieties are once more on the rise. Russian president Vladimir Putin's nuclear posturing in February 2018 suggests that the world might be heading toward another full-fledged Cold War, with two great powers poised to take the fatal step over the abyss.

It ultimately remains to be seen whether the epic will continue to make an appearance on the film screens of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For the most part, its cultural resonance has been supplanted by a genre no less grandiose but not restricted to the period of antiquity: the superhero film. Whether it is the Avengers warding off the cataclysmic doomsday initiated by the rogue robot Ultron or Batman and Superman defeating the machinations of nihilistic villain Lex Luthor, the modern anxieties about the apocalypse have migrated into a new cinematic idiom. However, in their emphasis on the imminence of global demise and their utopian sensibilities, these new films owe a great debt to their epic forebears.

The superhero film also features male heroes as deeply conflicted as their counterparts in antiquity, their bodies subjected to the agonies and torments of the current, highly technological and increasingly mechanized world. What's more, the narratives of these films remain punctured by a sense of futility engendered by the knowledge that, though the battle may be won, the larger war of which so many heroes are a part is fated to go on. Superman, Wonder Woman, Black Panther, and all the rest remain condemned to exist in a perpetual state of crisis. No matter how strong they are and no matter how completely they seem to defeat the enemies of life on earth, there is always a new villain to be vanquished, a new apocalypse to be averted. The fact that

these victories often entail enormous destruction exacerbates the experience of imminent and immanent global catastrophe. Through its modern descendent of the superhero film, the epic remains with us, offering both an escape from and an encounter with our deepest desires and, inevitably, our darkest terrors as well.

## Notes

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### Introduction

1. By historical time I mean an understanding of temporality as moving in one direction and as synonymous with inevitable progress.

2. The historian Theofilo F. Ruiz, whose work has greatly influenced this dissertation, refers to Walter Benjamin's evocative essay "The Angel of History," in which he refers to the human detritus left in the wake of history's progress (11).

3. By "American culture" I have in mind two related meanings. First, I use "culture" to refer to the social currents and discourses—politics, religion, sexuality, science, philosophy, economics—circulating at a given historical moment. Second, I use "culture" to refer to those textual objects—films, novels, and other forms—that give expression to those other, environmental elements.

4. Patricia Jane Roylance, in *Eclipse of Empires: World History in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, similarly argues that "stories about the deterioration of once-powerful empires like Rome proved viscerally compelling because they heightened anxiety about intranational problems then plaguing the United States, given the downfall of civilizations previously plagued by the same problems" (5).

5. Allusions to the Holy Land and its relevance for those living in the present would persist, and the Old Testament story of the Hebrews fleeing bondage in Egypt to forge a new destiny in a land of their own proved to be a particularly powerful myth for the Puritans. During the Revolutionary period, the colonists would frame themselves as the Hebrews to King George's tyrannical pharaoh (Oren 85).

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6. Curtis Dahl points out that Martin would influence “the American School of Catastrophe,” a group of painters and poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century obsessed with scenes of destruction and chaos (380-390). Furthermore, Martin’s work would influence D.W. Griffith’s aesthetic, which in turn would cast a long shadow over the Hollywood epic (Wood 19).

7. Box office data drawn from [filmsite.org](http://filmsite.org).

8. Unfortunately, due to the mammoth cost overruns of *Cleopatra*, it would not make a profit during its initial run.

9. Wyke thus participates in a particular school of thought regarding historical film that sees the genre primarily reflecting the immediate concerns of the present in a fairly straightforward fashion. Scholars such as Robert Rosenstone and Pierre Sorlin are representative of this tradition.

10. They argue in particular against Paul Schrader’s *Transcendental Style in Film*, which has little positive to say about epic films.

## Chapter 1

1. Grace identifies “miracle-time” as the signature chronotope of the religious film. She argues that, in these films, “there are also breaks in between the barrier between the meaningless ticking of the clock in *chronos* and the glorious eternal world of *kairos* [...] These processes conquer the limitations of space as well as time” (5-6).

2. For an erudite exploration of the congruence of a mastery of time and modernity (particularly through mechanical measurement), see Thomas M. Allen’s *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, especially the

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introduction, “Time and Modern Nationhood” (1-16), Chapter 2, “Material Time” (59-113), and Chapter 3, “Clockwork Nation” (114-145).

3. The announcement in 1949 that the Soviets had tested their own atomic bombs produced a contradictory response in the *Bulletin*, in which Eugene Rabinowitch stated that “we do not advise Americans that doomsday is near and that they can expect atomic bombs to start falling on their heads a month or a year from now; but we think they have reason to be deeply alarmed and to be prepared for grave decisions” (273). He would later refer to “the inexorable trend leading to atomic war” (275). He concludes with a warning that the “distant rumbling of the first Soviet atom bomb shows the world well advanced towards the abyss of an atomic war” (292).

4. For example, in her 1947 book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir writes: “Men of today seem to feel more acutely than ever the paradox of their condition. They know themselves to be the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated, but the exigencies of action force them to treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means. The more widespread their mastery of the world, the more they find themselves crushed by uncontrollable forces. Though they are masters of the atomic bomb, yet it is created only to destroy them” (8-9).

5. Tony Jackson argues that “[...] Kermode’s book belies this claim [...] Kermode is evidently experiencing the nuclear sense of ending in such a way that he will not simply make a positive statement about reaching the new year some weeks away” (330-331). He likewise proposes that Kermode’s work is symptomatic of a Cold War struggle with conceptualizing fiction, narrative, and endings.

6. In that sense, Moses is similar to El Cid, the central character of the 1961 film of the same name; Charlton Heston also starred in that film, in which he played the Spanish hero.

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Ultimately, he dies, but his lifeless corpse is nevertheless used by his fellow generals as a source of inspiration for the remaining soldiers, his body rendered into an abject symbol, a blank canvass for others to utilize. As Leon Hunt powerfully puts it: “man is placed on a pedestal, something to be worshipped. But a transcendent, glowing phallus is only made possible by the death of the human subject. The ultimate Father is a corpse” (74).

7. Mourlet famously referred to Heston as an “axiom” who “constitutes a tragedy in himself, his presence in any film being enough to instil beauty. The pent-up violence expressed by the sombre phosphorescence of his eyes, his eagle’s profile, the imperious arch of his eyebrows, the hard, bitter curve of his lips, the stupendous strength of his torso—this is what he has been given, and what not even the worst of directors can debase [...] Through him, *mise en scène* can confront the most intense of conflicts and settle them with the contempt of a god imprisoned, quivering with muted rage” (234).

8. This was also the period that saw the release of several films in which the Holocaust is either in the background or a major part of the plot, including *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), *Exodus* (1960), and *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961).

## **Chapter 2**

1. Davis points out that there were dozens of Holy Land panoramas in the United States. Frederick Catherwood’s cyclorama depicting Jerusalem, which came to New York in 1838, was a particularly prominent example (55-56).

2. It is worth noting that the promise of an experience of an alternate reality totally unmediated by architecture has close ties to the pleasures offered by the panoramas of the 19th Century.



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3. Indeed, the original 3-camera Cinerama would be almost exclusively used for non-narrative films, with travelogues continuing to be the favored vehicle. Two narrative films, *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm* (1962) and *How the West Was Won* (1962) were produced in the original Cinerama format.

4. Though *How to Marry a Millionaire* was technically the first film produced in CinemaScope, the distinction of being the first film released in the process goes to *The Robe*, in large part because it was thought that a biblical epic would provide a better means of showcasing the appeals of this new technology.

5. See also Plantinga's essay "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film," 240-248.

6. Vivian Sobchack has made a similar point regarding the tension between transcendence and immanence in religious cinema. She argues, "our sense of transcendence in immanence not only relocates us 'beyond' the presentness of our flesh to dwell in the on-screen world but also refers us reflexively (and without a thought) back to our own fleshly presence—this in a mediating structure that, as it vacillates between our intentional relocation 'elsewhere' on the screen and our fleshly presence 'here' and 'now' in the theater simultaneously intensifies and diffuses both our senses and our sensual location" (197).

7. For clarity's sake, Technirama here refers to the process in which the film was shot, while Super Technirama 70 was the name given to those Technirama films that were exhibited on 70 mm. *Barabbas*, according to Carr and Hayes, as well as the reviews cited in my discussion, was exhibited in some roadshows using Super Technirama 70 (277-278). My analysis of the film's widescreen appeals and affects is based on the widened aspect ratio enabled by

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Technirama, with additional reference to the impact its exhibition in 70 mm. would have had on those privileged to see it in its premium format.

8. See, for example, Steve Neale's essay "The Art of the Palpable: Composition and Staging in the Widescreen Films of Anthony Mann," which discusses the ways in which Mann's skill with widescreen composition influenced the opening sequence of *Spartacus* (which he directed before being leaving the film due to conflicts with Kirk Douglas).

9. It is worth pointing out the difference in emphasis between the trades and the mainstream press. While a trade paper like *The Independent Exhibitors Film Bulletin* focused on exhibition, the mainstream press tended to focus on such elements as performance, as with the Crowther quote above.

10. David Eldridge has a compelling discussion of the differences between *David and Bathsheba* and *The Robe*, which shared both a screenwriter and a cinematographer (Philip Dunne and Leon Shamroy, respectively) and a studio (Fox). As he points out in some detail, the pre-widescreen *David and Bathsheba* consistently positions the spectator as a voyeur rather than a participant, in marked contrast to *The Robe* (69-72)

### Chapter 3

1. Gerald Forshey, in his discussion of the "sex and social responsibility" cycle of postwar epics, asserts that these films ultimately assert that "if passion is allowed to rule over reason and if the pleasure principle, joined with materialism, is allowed free expression, then the entire political and social order may be thrown into chaos. The solution, therefore, is to make the pleasure principle (sexuality) subject to the appropriate and officially sanctioned social institutions (marriage) (80).

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2. Richard Lindsay, in his book on camp and queer spectacle, notes that in these films “the senses are pushed and pulled, the libido stroked and engorged, only to have the purifying holiness of God come crashing down. This is the pleasure *and* the pain of these films. The exquisite agony of God’s wrath as experienced in the biblical epic would be impossible without the sensual excess of the genre’s overwrought spectacle” (xxviii).

3. Leo Bersani, in *A Future for Astyanax*, notes that “the endless repetition of desires suppressed by guilt and angry frustration ultimately leads to the fantasy of death as the absolute pleasure” (6).

4. Patrick Alac writes of the bikini, “through the striking metaphor that this era conceived in representing as a sex symbol, an image of our desire for life (a woman’s body in its divine perfection) blends with the representation of our measureless desire for destruction (an atomic bomb in its simple streamlined perfection) [...] It is as if we wanted to swap over our two deepest desires—for life and for death—and were striving to obscure the marked differences that distinguish them, by the passion with which we pursue them” (37).

5. Cynthia Hendershot argues that the posing of Christians as a corpse suggested “a sexualization of death present in the eroticization of the bomb,” which speaks to “a covert desire for nuclear war as a sexual experience, as a final climax [...] The erotic connotations given to the bomb in the postwar period suggest an association between death and sexuality writ large” (91-92).

6. Marling argues that the 1950s was a “world that openly craved color. Color was an index of status and fashion in the 1950s. It signified a break with the sameness of the military uniform, an answer to the drabness of hard times, a visible sign of a car or a set of kitchen cabinets bought brand, spanking new. Color was an extra, a mark of futuristic technology at

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work, of miracle fabrics and plastics in a thousand unimaginable rainbow-tinted hues.”

Regarding Technicolor, she notes: “in a darkened theater, color exuded a kind of lavishness, a sensuality lacking in the grainy, small-screen dramas and sitcoms that played nightly amid the clutter of the typical suburban Cape Cod” (220).

7. For a full discussion of Schlesinger’s investment in rehabilitating a particularly liberal form of Cold War masculinity, see Chapter 1 of Cuordileone’s *Manhood and Political Culture in the Cold War*.

8. Reumann notes that “the death and anomie associated here with the modern homosexual resonated with national concerns in the wake of a world war and the unleashing of the atomic bomb [...] Homosexuality was seen by sympathetic as well as hostile commentators as synchronous with generational pessimism, despair over the atomic bomb, and a general sense that the contemporary United States was a ‘dying society’” (189).

9. David Batchelor remarks in his landmark study *Chromophobia* that color has long been associated with the defilement of the spirit. In a revealing comment, he identifies color as “the mythical, savage state out of which civilization, the nobility of the human spirit, slowly, heroically, has lifted itself” (23). Further, “Colour “is often close to the body and never far away from sexuality, be it heterosexual or homosexual [...] When sex comes into the picture, colour tends to come with it, and when colour occurs, sex is often not too far away” (63).

10. I draw here on Dyer’s theory of utopia, in particular his assertion that the utopian drive in Hollywood entertainment is to provide solutions to the problems posed by capitalism. I would extend this to suggest that utopia also poses solutions to the problems of modernity writ large, especially the relentless, unsettling move toward the future.

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11. He points out that in *Vertigo* the combined optic and haptic appeals of color make it seem as if the plush velvets can be touched and caressed. The sensuous pleasures of the color image are contagious, exceeding the bounds imposed by form, so that Scotty's normally blue eyes glow green after seeing Madeleine (10).

12. Laura Marks argues that images that evoke the pleasure of touching “construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image [...] the viewer relinquishes her own sense of separateness from the image—not to know it, but to give herself up to desire for it” (183). Jennifer Barker likewise contends that this sort of filmic contact “challenges traditional notions of film and viewer as distant and distinct from one another [...] Film and viewer come together in a mutual exchange between two bodies who communicate their desire, not only for the other but for themselves, in the act of touching [...] In the mutual contact [...] each recognizes the other as a perceptive, expressive, and desiring subject” (34).

13. Blyth argues that “every outfit accentuates her sensuality, inciting the viewer's desire to touch both it and its wearer” (124). For more on the similarities between Delilah's costume and the New Look that, as we have seen, was increasingly popular in postwar America, see Llewelyn-Jones, 14-29.

14. See in particular Exum (1996 and 2016) and Meyer (2015).

15. Blyth makes a similar point (133).

16. Emblematic in this respect is Exum's claim, in the tradition of early feminist (particularly psychoanalytic) film theory, that “desire for the male spectator is active. For the female spectator desire is passive: the desire to be attractive like the woman, the desire to be desired” (233). Blyth, while drawing attention to the power that Delilah wields as a *femme fatale*, ultimately concludes that the film intends or Delilah as a warning about dangerous, desiring

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women. While I agree that this seems to be the film's intent, I argue that the film—and the experience of antiquity it provides—is far more complicated than it at first appears (120-138).

17. See Julie Grossman's *Ready for her Close-up*, in particular her discussion in Chapter 2 (21-40).

18. Blyth argues that these comparisons “accentuate her otherness—she is dangerous, unpredictable, and carnal” and that these characteristics are part of her power (129).

19. She expresses this sentiment twice during the film, thus underscoring its explicit concern with the yearning for death to be found in the midst of desire.

20. Fraser goes on to lay out the ways in which the vamp was also associated with the uneasy allure of death (200-201).

21. Writing about fantasy, Linda Williams similarly argues that “fantasies are not, as is sometimes thought, wish-fulfilling linear narratives of mastery and control leading to closure and the attainment of desire. They are marked, rather, by the prolongation of desire, and by the lack of fixed position with respect to the objects and events fantasized” (10).

22. As both Kyle Stevens and Robert Rushing have noted in somewhat different contexts, the use of color can express characters' desires in ways that go beyond mere words, the rush of color into the film mimicking the flush of the body in a moment of sexual excitement.

Remarking on *The Sound of Music* and *Written on the Wind*, Barker similarly contends that “music and color rush to the surface of these films in the same way that our emotions rise up and make themselves visible” (147).

23. This phrase comes from Deleuze (33).

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24. This gown in particular has clear antecedents in the costuming of Theda Bara in her role as *Cleopatra*, another cinematic woman known for her ability to bring men (and kingdoms) to ruin.

25. Ina Rae Hark makes a similar point about the inability of a film like *The Robe* to ever fully recuperate the masculinity of its heroes, one of whom, incidentally, is Demetrius, also played by Mature.

26. When Deleuze writes that the destruction provokes an Olympian laughter, I argue that he means something more complex than Jonathan Stubbs, who suggests that Deleuze refers to a combination of the sublime and the ridiculous (142). It seems to me that it is an uneasy sort of laughter that hovers between the pleasure of watching punishment meted out and an awareness of one's complicity in the torments.

27. Exum takes the position that the film invites the male spectator "to take David's symbolic position as the focalizer of the gaze" (29). Other scholars, such as Kelso and Meyer, usefully point out the flaws in this reasoning. Kelso suggests that the moment also allows David to experience and gaze at his own hysterical impotence. Meyer, entering the discussion, says that "she is also inverting a foundational spectatorial stereotype" (54).

28. In this respect, her hair bears a passing resemblance to another red-haired star, Maureen O'Hara, who was proclaimed "The Queen of Technicolor."

29. In that sense, the film uses color in a similar fashion to one of Peck's earlier films, *Duel in the Sun*, in which a bruised, often excessive, color palette characterizes the doomed romance between Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones) and Lewt McCanles (Peck). In that film, this sultry Technicolor palette intertwines sexuality and fatality, expressing a certain desire-in-death

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sensibility. In staging a violent, brutal clash of passions where the only ending can be death, this earlier, like *David and Bathsheba*, exposes the destabilizing power of desire.

30. Fitzgerald argues that films such as *Quo Vadis* position the presumptive spectator in a divided position, as both the pampered subjects of Nero and as the Christians waiting for their execution, knowing that the future belongs to them, either in eternity or, more materially, in history. In this formulation, the anxiety of complicity provoked by the former is assuaged by the historico-spiritual certainty of the latter (Fitzgerald 25)

31. Babington and Evans argue that he is “an outlet as well as a punishment for the audience’s narcissistic fantasies, [and] he is also the condemned yet, in some sense secretly approved, persecutor of the super-ego Christianity, crushing and bleeding its martyrs, and finally feeding them to the wild beasts, representatives of the feral appetites they condemn” (205).

32. In that sense, he is also an embodiment of the demonic other that Michael Rogin argues has long been a staple of American political thought, an opportunity for an anxious hegemonic American to articulate its anxieties and to “indulge his [sic] forbidden desires” (xiii).

## Chapter 4

1. Brown argues that the historical gaze “is essentially the literal embodiment of the standard rhetoric of many historical films, and a means through which the films address the historical knowledge of the spectator.” The characters who possess this gaze “foresee the actions necessary to the progress of history, and in the case of history’s most powerful agents [...] they seem endowed with a clairvoyance through which they appear to recognize events to come.” In performative gestures—whether looking out at grand historical vistas or into the more abstract



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realm of the future, these characters to see both the vast temporal expanse of history and their own place within it (163-165).

2. Churchill was a part of the opposition from 1945 and 1951 but would return for another term as prime minister from 1951-1955. He was succeeded the first time by Clement Atlee (who would oversee the independence of India) and the second time by Anthony Eden (who would oversee the Suez Crisis).

3. For more on the production troubles that afflicted the film, see in particular *My Life with Cleopatra: The Making of a Hollywood Classic* by Walter Wanger and Joe Hyams.

4. Bettina Bildhauer makes a similar point in her discussion of Douglas Sirk's *Sign of the Pagan*. What sets *Cleopatra* apart, however, is the fact that it does not bring in the tension of the Christian understanding of time. This lack of the solacing presence of Christ forces an encounter with the inevitability of history's progression.

5. See also his essays "A Critical Appreciation of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*" and "Fact, Fiction, and the Feeling of History," in the same volume.

6. See also Briggs (232-233), on the speech's similarities to Kennedy's acceptance of the Democratic nomination.

7. Peter W. Rose makes a similar point in his discussion of the film. He stresses the utopian aspect of Marcus Aurelius' vision and the anxieties of empire, showing in detail how the film responds to the geo-political crises of the early 1960s. While I agree with Rose, he tends to rely too much on straightforward relations between the film and its context and pays too little to the meaning and the experience engendered by the film's structural tensions (247-260).

8. Paul Willemen asserted some time ago that part of the pleasure of Mann's films stems from the ability to watch the male hero broken, and then symbolically restored, through brutality.

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9. For a more thorough discussion of the aesthetic dimensions of this scene, see Winkler's "A Critical Appreciation of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 22-25.

## Conclusion

1. Pauline Kael would similarly remark that "the God who orders these events is so primitive and inexplicable that we may indeed wonder and perhaps be appalled" (34).

2. See Solomon (2008) about the presence of Rome in television before *Rome*.

3. For other readings of the imperial politics of *Gladiator*, see Solomon (2012), Wilson (2002), and White (2002).

4. For more on the use of masculinity in these films, see Pierce (2011) and Courcoux (2009).

5. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones argues that Alexander's conquest of Persia "cannot be divorced from Orientalist colonial travel reports obsessed with the details of perceived Eastern sensual overindulgence [...] *Alexander* reproduces what Said refers to as the 'imaginative geography of Orientalism' [...] In *Alexander* we accompany, quite literally, the perspective of the 'discoverer'—and it is precisely this point of view that defines his historical position" (254).

6. Exemplary in this regard is Antoine Courcoux, who argues that the death of these characters renders them into "masculine martyrs," "demiurgeous figure[s]" who help to soothe the male ego, which has been badly bruised and battered by the vicissitudes of modernity (34-38).

7. He later argues that, in films such as *300*, there can be no future for the peplum hero (89-90).

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8. Other characters were similarly white-washed, including Rameses (Joel Edgerton), his mother Tuya (Sigourney Weaver), and Joshua (Aaron Paul). Speaking to *Variety*, Scott defended himself by saying: “I can’t mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such” (Foundas n.p.n.).

9. Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* faced similar criticisms and similar restrictions in Muslim-majority countries.

10. For example, though *Gladiator* was the #4 box office success of 2000, neither *Troy* nor *Alexander* cracked the top ten (*Troy* was #13 and *Alexander* 81). *300* was #10 for 2007. More recent films such as *Noah*, *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, and *Ben-Hur* have struggled not just to crack the top ten but to even turn a profit at all. *Ben-Hur* made just over \$94 million on a \$100 million budget. (All box office figures from Box Office Mojo).

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**EDUCATION**

Ph.D., English, Syracuse University, Expected May 2018

Dissertation: *History's Perilous Pleasures: Experiencing Antiquity in the Postwar Hollywood Epic* (Chairs: Steven Cohan and Roger Hallas)

M.A., English, Syracuse University, 2011

Certificate of Advanced Study: Women's and Gender Studies, Women's and Gender Studies Department

B.A., English, History and Classics (Minor in Spanish), Marshall University, 2007

**ACADEMIC HONORS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND CERTIFICATIONS****Syracuse University**

Mary Hatch Marshall Award for the Best Essay by a Graduate Student in the Humanities	2018
Syracuse University Humanities Center Dissertation Fellowship	2017-2018
James Elson Teaching Award	2017
University Outstanding TA Award	2017
Cornell School of Criticism and Theory Sponsored Fellowship, Department of English	2013
Summer Study Fellowship (Department of English)	2012-2016

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE****Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY****Instructor of Record/Teaching Associate:**

WRT 105: Practices of Academic Writing	Fall 2009/10
WRT 205: Critical Research and Writing	Spring 2010/ 2011
ETS 145: Reading Popular Culture	Fall 2012/14/16/Spring 2017/Summer 2015
ETS 154: Interpretation of Film	Spring 2013/14/16
ETS 192: Gender and Literary Texts	Fall 2013
ETS 182: Race and Literary Texts	Spring 2015
ETS 153: Interpretation of Fiction	Fall 2015

**Teaching Assistant:**

ETS 154: Interpretation of Film	Fall 2011
ETS 145: Reading Popular Culture	Spring 2012

**Other Relevant Experience**

Writing Consultant, SummerStart Program  
 Writing Consultant, Writing Center

Summer 2010  
 Spring 2010, Fall 2010

**PUBLICATIONS**

“Ben-Her(?): Soft Stardom, Sentiment, and the Critique of Muscular Christian Masculinity in *Ben-Hur* (2016).” *New Heart and New Spirit: The Bible Onscreen Since 2004*. Ed. Wickham Clayton. Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming.

“Going Ape: Animacy and Affect in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011).” *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, forthcoming.

“The Spirit is Willing but the Flesh is Weak: Embodiment, Transcendence, and Historical Spectatorship in the Historico-Biblical Epic.” *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects, and Belief*, forthcoming.

“Turning Gold into Lead: Sexual Pathology and the Demythologizing of Augustus in HBO’s *Rome* (2005-2007).” *Golden Ages in Film and Television*. Ed. Meredith Safran. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming.

“Queer Nostalgia and Queer Histories,” special issue co-edited with Bridget Kies, including co-authored introduction, *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* 2.2 (2017).

“Classic Media Review: *Quo Vadis* (1951).” *Queer Studies in Media and Popular Culture* 2.2 (2017): 261-264.

“Brothers in Arms: *Spartacus*, Historical Television, and the Celebration of Queer Masculinity.” *Queer Television in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Ed. Kylo-Patrick Hart. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016.

“Thank You for Being a Friend: The Politics, History, and Fandom of *The Golden Girls* and Its Feminist Message for the Coming Decade.” *MP* 3, no. 1. (August 2010), 1-17.

**Select Web-Based Publications**

Creator and Author, *Queerly Different*, an academic blog providing critical commentary on film, literature, politics, and social issues, 2013-present. [www.tjwest3.com](http://www.tjwest3.com)

“Aesthetics and Affiliation in *Gotham*.” *Antenna*. 24 March 2015.  
<http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2015/03/24/aesthetics-and-affiliation-in-gotham/>

“The Conflicted Populism of *Parks and Recreation*.” *Antenna*. 5 March 2015.  
<http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2015/03/05/the-conflicted-populism-of-parks-and-recreation/>

“Jessica Lange’s Abject Femininity.” *Antenna*. 20 December 2014.  
<http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2014/12/20/jessica-langes-bject-femininity/>

“Victims of History(?): *Game of Thrones*, Historicity, and the Violence Against Women Problem.” Contributor to *in media res*, *Game of Thrones* theme week, 22-27 September 2014. <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/>

“Of Condoms and Cheesecakes: Female Discourse and Sexual Agency in *The Golden Girls*.” Contributor to *in media res*, *The Golden Girls* theme week, 9-13 June 2014. <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/>

### **Editorial Service**

Editorial Intern with the Graduate School Press of Syracuse University, 2016-present.

Editor and Reader, *Metathesis: A Forum for Critical Analysis and Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue*, 2015-2017. [www.metathesisblog.com](http://www.metathesisblog.com)

### **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS AND INVITED TALKS**

“The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak: Embodied Transcendence and Widescreen Spectatorship in *The Robe* (1953).” The Society for Cinema and Media studies Conference. Toronto, Ontario. March 2018.

“Paradise Lost: Melancholic Utopia in *Cleopatra* (1963).” Syracuse University Humanities Center Dissertation Fellows Showcase.” Syracuse, NY. January 2018.

“A Home at the End of the World?: Escaping Apocalypse and Seeking Temporal Transcendence in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*” (1954). The *Film and History* Conference. Milwaukee, WI. November 2017.

“‘The Anachronistic Savagery of Aniline Dyes’: The Technicolor Sex Drive and the Unquiet Pleasures of Postwar Epic Film.” Department of English Colloquium. Syracuse, NY. September 2017

“Who’s that Lady?: Women’s Historical Fiction and the Experience of Antiquity.” Celtic Conference in Classics. Montreal, QC. July 2017.

“The Spirit is Willing, but the Flesh is Weak: Embodiment, Transcendence, and Sacro-Historical Spectatorship in the Historico-Biblical Epic.” The Place of Religion in Film Conference. Syracuse, NY. March 2017.

“The (Un)Fortunate Fall into Color: The Technicolor Sex Drive and the Unquiet Pleasures of History in Cecil B. DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949).” The Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Chicago, IL. March 2017

“The Metal in the Maker’s Hand: Impotent Agency, Atomic Divinity, and the Terror of History in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956).” The *Film and History* Conference. Milwaukee, WI. October 2016.

- “Doubting Thomas: Queer Temporality, Queer Tragedies, and the Critique of Hetero-Masculine Nostalgia in *The Tudors* and *Downton Abbey*. Console-ing Passions. Notre Dame, IN. June 2016.
- “History’s Perilous Pleasures: Experiencing Antiquity in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Sign of the Cross* (1932).” The *Film and History* Conference. Madison, WI. November 2015.
- “Selling Trashy History: *Spartacus*, Violent Male Spectacle, and Starz’s Quest for a Brand Identity.” The Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Montreal, Quebec. March 2015.
- “Turning Gold into Lead: Sexual Pathology and the Demythologizing of Augustus in HBO’s *Rome* (2005-2007).” The *Film and History* Conference. Madison, WI. October 2014.
- “Going Ape: The Posthuman Ethics of Animality, Affiliation, and Affect in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011).” The Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Seattle, WA. March 2014.
- “Selling Sexy History and Family Values: Studio Branding, Disruptive Desire, and *Quo Vadis* (1951).” The *Film and History* Conference. Madison, WI. September 2013.
- “Gods and Monsters: Impossible Temporalities, (Super)Human Bodies, and the Pleasures of Mythological Epic Cinema.” The *Film and History* Conference. Milwaukee, WI. September 2012.
- “Queen for a Day: Melodrama, History, and *The Other Boleyn Girl*.” The Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. Boston, MA. March 2012.
- “Good Girl/Bad Girl: The Woman in the 21st Century Epic Film.” The Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. San Antonio, TX. April 2011
- “The World Turned Upside Down: Strong Women and Corrupted Men in the Second Season of HBO’s *Rome*.” The *Film and History* Conference. Milwaukee, WI. November 2010.
- “Thank You for Being a Friend: The Network Presence and Changing Fandom of *The Golden Girls*.” The Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. St. Louis, MO. March-April 2010.

## **SERVICE**

### **Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY**

Teaching Mentor, Syracuse University TA Orientation	2013-2017
Graduate Representative, Graduate Committee Department of English	2014-2015
Graduate Representative, Hiring Committee for Film Faculty Department of English	2013-2014
Graduate Representative, Agenda Committee Department of English	2013-2014



Graduate Representative, Undergraduate Committee Department of English	2012-2013
Ph.D. Facilitator, English Graduate Organization	2012-2013
Guest Lecture Series Organizer	2011-2014
Graduate Student Organization Representative, English Graduate Organization	2010-2011
Library Committee, Graduate Student Organization	2010-2011
Syracuse University Faculty Senate	2010-2011
M.A. Facilitator, English Graduate Organization	2010-2011
First Year Representative, English Graduate Organization	2009-2010

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

Society for Cinema and Media Studies