
Brill's New Pauly

Film

(4,580 words)

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[German version]

A. History (CT)

The beginning of the silent film era at the end of the 19th cent. opened up a new venue for communicating information about the ancient world. The medium of film addresses Antiquity in two ways, first in the form of citations [30; 36], i.e. references to ancient names, motifs and objects. For example, ancient tragedy and its chorus provided the framework plot for Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite* (USA 1995), while the comedy *9 to 5* (USA 1980), in which three secretaries stage a revolt against their boss, echoes Aristophanes [1]. Particularly in the science fiction film genre, the ancient world, as a setting that is simultaneously familiar and distant, becomes the model for an unknown future where the inhabitants may be dressed in Greek garb and their forms of government resemble an Amazon state or a gerontocracy [23]. Second, the plot of these films may take place in the ancient world itself. A cinematic adaptation of ancient subject matter is multi-dimensional in a way previously unknown in reception history. It shares its visual presence with the fine arts; its narrative continuity with literature, especially modern novels; and beginning in the sound era, its acoustic presence with music and theatrical plays. Since there is much that we do not know about ancient life, owing to gaps in the fragmentary materials that have been handed down, it has been necessary to fill in these gaps with assumptions and opinions in order to arrive at a coherent picture [34. 73-74]. This applies to the plot as well as to all aspects of the backdrop and acting, such as gestures. However, these additions have frequently taken on a dynamic of their own, resulting in a new version of Antiquity being created in people's minds by the cinema. Thus well-known actors (particularly in the numerous cinematic versions of Nero and Cleopatra) have shaped our conception of historic figures and are ever-present associations [27. 35-36]. The portrayal of Imperial Rome in

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the film *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (USA 1963) was regarded as so accurate that it was used to depict Rome in a non-fiction book series [37. 147]. This reception process was enhanced as film became a mass medium in the first third of the 20th cent., and underwent a further increase and popularization in the television era, as famous films with ancient themes were rebroadcast and television productions took on these topics as well [30].

The genre of Antiquity films had already emerged during the silent film era, beginning in Italy [17; 11. 14-16; 31. 403-404], which was soon to be overtaken by the United States in this genre. Among the pioneers, as directors and often producers as well, were Giovanni Pastrone, D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. de Mille [2. 916-917, 1020-1024, 1253]. After World War I, as the sound era began, Hollywood took the lead [7; 11] in this area; these films were generally also costume dramas, and the American studios had greater economic resources than the Italian film industry. This did not put an end to the popularity of the genre in Italy, however, even if Italian productions were often much less lavish than those of their American competitors. For a long time the United States and Italy maintained their position as market leaders in this genre, followed by England.

During the 1950s and 1960s, in the era of wide-screen films, films set in Antiquity experienced a real boom [7; 11; 14; 31], which came to an end under the influence of the modernization movement of the 1970s. However, as the number of private broadcasting stations increased in the 1990s, and old productions have been shown more and more often on television as well as released on video, these films have not been forgotten, but, in terms of numbers, are reaching larger audiences. Toward the end of the 20th cent. there was clearly renewed interest, especially in the area of television productions, in making films particularly of mythological matter of Greek origin such as the ambitious filming of the myth of Odysseus (*Homer's Odyssey*, 1996) as a joint English, Turkish and Maltese production under the direction of Andrei Konchalovsky and with a cast of well-known actors.

Academic treatment of the genre was originally limited to film studies [7; 11; 14; 31]. While the study of the ancient world was long linked to the idea of a normative classicism which the genre of film as popularly understood did not satisfy, perspectives have since changed. Particularly in Anglo-American ancient studies, and specifically in the field of philology, films have become more prominent in modern research as a medium for the reception of information about the ancient world [19; 20; 21; 36; 38], and are also finding application in the framework of teaching the subject matter. [5; 6]. The question is often formulated in a dual manner, that is, what information the cinematic version of Antiquity gives us about the present of that time and its social, economic and political interests, as well as what it contributes to our current picture of the ancient world [38].

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B. Typology (CT)

Since there is no uniform and all-encompassing term for films that deal with the ancient world, we shall in the present article use the term Antiquity films [24]. In the Anglo-American world, most Antiquity films are considered to be part of the epic genre [7; 11]. Following the ancient concept of the epic, this refers to monumental films that treat, on an epic scale, heroic deeds performed in mythic and historical periods, not only ancient but also more recent ones, as well as themes drawn from the Bible [7. 1-24; 11. 29-46]. As such, the demands made by the *genus grande* are apparent in the decor and staging of the films (crowd scenes, costuming and sets, pathos-laden music and, in Anglo-American films, the use of Shakespearean language) and also in their presentation at the cinema (unusual length, intermissions, special premieres, high ticket prices, operatic overtures and intermission music, operatic length [38. 120]), as well as the descriptions used in the advertising of such films: "The Mightiest Story of Tyranny and Temptation Ever Written - Ever Lived - Ever Produced" for the film *The Silver Chalice*, 1954 [27. 27; 14. 47-48]; similarly, German television advertising for *Homer's Odyssey* called it "a TV production of superlatives".

Progress in cinematic technology, such as the development of the dolly and the wide screen [11. 22], made such a monumental endeavour possible, and the production phase was often epic as well. The Cleopatra production with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, for example, had to cope with epic demands in its lengthy filming process, ruinous expense for 20th Century-Fox and spectacular scandals involving the cast, with hitherto undreamt-of interest shown by radio, television and the print media. The affair between Burton and Taylor seemed to blur the distinction between the modern-day actors and the historical figures they portrayed [3; 4; 33; 38. 100-105].

Just as Antiquity films are sometimes classified according to characteristics of their style, they are also referred to in terms of their costumes. Thus in German-speaking countries the term *Sandalenfilme* [24], ('sandal films'), is used; in the Anglo-American world, reference is sometimes made to 'peplum films', derived from the Latinized form of the Greek word for the women's upper garment (*péplos*) [7. 21]--more commonly called (in the United States, at any rate) "sword and sandal" or "sandal and toga" films. Common classifications of epics include the following: moral and religious, particularly Biblical films; national epics, such as typically American films like *Birth of a Nation* (USA 1915) and *Gone With the Wind* (USA 1939); as well as historical epics, including not only Antiquity films such as *Alexander the Great* (USA 1956), *Spartacus* (USA 1960) and the various Cleopatra films, but also historical films from more recent periods, like *Lawrence of Arabia* (GB 1962) and *El Cid* (USA/Spain 1961) [7; 11].

Biblical films draw on motifs and stories from the Old and New Testaments (*The Ten Commandments* USA 1957; *Samson and Delilah* USA 1950; *The Prodigal* USA 1955; *King of Kings* USA 1960) [16; 28. 80-126], while historical Antiquity films often base their scripts on 19th cent. novels, for example *Quo Vadis*, by Henryk Sienkiewicz (1894-1896), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and Lewis Wallace's *Ben Hur* (1880) [38. 28, 112-140, 150-173]. Along with periods in Near Eastern history (*Io, Semiramide* It. 1962; *Land of the Pharaohs* USA 1955; *The Egyptian* USA 1954), these films are set mainly in the Greek and Roman eras [28. 141-165], and in the case of Roman history the focus is largely on the conflict between the Roman state and early Christians (*The Sign of the Cross* USA 1932; *Ben Hur* USA 1959; *Quo vadis* USA 1951; *The Robe* USA 1953; *Silver Chalice* USA 1954) [28. 126-140].

The genre of Antiquity films also includes works under the general heading of neo-mythologizing [24. 83-90; 31] that present ancient myths and legends of Greece and Rome in a manner that is often only very loosely based on the source material; thus the Greek hero Hercules, the fictional character Maciste or Samson are depicted in Italian films of the 1950s and 1960s as popular heroes in a constant battle against evil in a setting somewhere to the east of Greece, and in periods other than Antiquity (e.g. *Maciste alla Corte dello Zar* It. 1964) [7. 81-84; 17. 174-175; 28. 191-201]. During the 1980s, Hercules became almost a fantasy figure (*Hercules in New York* USA/It. 1982), showing up again in the 1990s as a Disney Studios cartoon character (*Hercules* USA 1997).

Early Roman history during the time of Punic War was made into a musical with aquatic numbers in *Jupiter's Darling* (USA 1955), with Esther Williams in the lead role as Amytis, the betrothed of Fabius Maximus who falls in love with Hannibal. The genre of the Antiquity film was parodied in the idiosyncratic version of the story of Jesus by the English comedy group Monty Python (*The Life of Brian* GB 1979) as well as in the story of Cleopatra presented in the Carry On film series, also a British production (*Carry on Cleo* GB 1965) [28. 180-190].

Quite different from the films mentioned above are Antiquity films based on ancient literature (tragedy, epic, novel, history) [28. 166-179] or more recent treatments of ancient motifs, such as the plays of Shakespeare or Shaw [7. 89-93, 99-102]. Particular mention should be made in this context of the filming of the Euripides trilogy (*Elektra/The Trojan Women/Iphigenia*) by Michael Cacoyannis [19; 20; 21] and the works of Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Medea* (1970) and *Edipo Re* (1967), as well as Federico Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969) [32], in which the ancient world is presented not in its popularised, classicistic image, but as strange, threatening, ugly and often obscene.

The main plot of Antiquity films based on modern works is generally a love story with a happy ending, whatever the actual historical facts. The epic hero and heroine are thus depicted according to strict gender-specific conventions. The male protagonist is generally courageous and able to master difficult challenges and tests; the virtuous heroine tends to be noble and to

require protection. Female figures such as ancient ruling women who break with these gender-specific conventions are often portrayed in a very ambivalent manner, often as a *femme fatale*, and by the end of the film they are usually reduced to the role of a loving wife or required to heroically renounce love or even their lives [11. 103-112; 12; 34. 84-89].

Like the depiction of role-defined behaviour, physical depictions in such films adhere to traditional gender-specific expectations. Most of the male actors are muscular and even, in the case of some "B movies", former winners of the Mr. Universe title [12. 70], while the actresses portraying ancient women, particularly in Italian films, have come to the cinema by way of beauty contests [2. 313]. The women's costumes and hair styles tend to present a version of ancient fashion that is adapted to suit modern tastes, and eroticism is a marked characteristic [8. 235; 25; 26; 34. 83]. Thus standard motifs of this genre include belly dancing performed by the main or by secondary female characters, usually dressed in bikini tops and harem trousers or slit skirts (*The Prodigal* USA 1955; *Cleopatra* USA 1934; *The Serpent from the Nile* USA 1953; *Le Legioni di Cleopatra* It./France 1959; *Cleopatra* USA 1963; *Quo vadis* USA 1951; *Nel segno di Roma* It./France/West Germany 1958; *La vendetta dei barbari* It. 1960; *Teodora, imperatrice di Bisanzio* It. 1954) [34. 80].

This type of erotic emphasis also points to another characteristic of the reception of Antiquity in film: orientalization. It is of little significance in this context whether the action of a given film takes place in the Near East or in the Eastern hemisphere of the Roman Empire. Rather, a certain contemporary image of a Turkish or Arabian Orient acts here as a code for decadence that can be portrayed at any time or place in ancient history [34. 77-83]. The lavish and detailed picture of the Orient presented in 19th cent. painting, in particular, was the inspiration for the sets and costumes of these films [13]. The exoticism typical of the oriental style of certain operas of the 19th cent. with subjects like "*Aida*" also made its way into the film industry [9]. In the absence of ancient musical themes, and owing to the fact that ancient instruments are largely familiar only as images, ancient music is presented in modern films in the style of Janissary music, romantic themes or pompous march music, a tradition broken only when Pasolini and Fellini began to try ethnomusic [29].

Along with an emphasis on physicality, there is a striking degree of brutality in the action depicted in these films. Hidden among the themes of Antiquity films, this satisfies the demands of a contemporary audience for scenes of violence and cruelty, as in the gladiator scenes in *Spartacus* (USA 1960); in some cases, a display of the male body plays to homoerotic voyeurism [12; 14. 49-50; 31. 407]. The topical elements of Antiquity films also include chariot races (*Cleopatra* 1934; various versions of the Ben Hur subject matter, *Teodora, imperatrice di Bisanzio* It. 1954; a parody in the film *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (USA 1966), based on plays by Plautus) and the 'Voice of God', the resonant masculine voice of a quasi-omniscient commentator from offstage, who introduces the action and offers final comments at the end, lending authority to the film's content [27. 25, 34-35].

[German version]

C. Effect (CT)

The success of the Antiquity film genre during the period between the two World Wars and after World War II can be explained in terms of two effects: escapism and identification. By transporting the audience to another time and another, more colourful place, they provided distraction from everyday problems. Furthermore, the eroticization of the main female roles in particular made it possible to get around strict censorship in Italy and the United States, where most Antiquity films were produced. In Italy, it was especially the Catholic Church that monitored sexual morality in films, simultaneously acting as moral censor and as cinema owner, particularly in rural areas [15. 13-14; 24. 84]. In Hollywood, meanwhile, agreement had been reached in the 1930s on the so-called 'production code', a system of self-censorship by the film studios set up in response to pressure from social interest groups (the Catholic Church and other religious groups) [2. 775-776] that remained in force until the 1960s. Under this code it was prohibited to show explicit sexual acts; nor were films permitted to show double beds [22. 276-277]. Moreover, films were expected to portray intact families and marriages in a favourable light. Ancient female figures like Cleopatra, who since Antiquity had been associated with seduction and adultery in literature and the fine arts, offered an excellent opportunity for projecting erotic fantasies without endangering contemporary morals, since such figures were, after all, from a long-ago era [10; 35]. The same was true of the motif of decadence (e.g. scenes of sumptuous banquets and court revelry) or the well-known female sinners in the Bible (such as the temple priestess Samarra in *The Prodigal* or *Delilah*).

In southern Europe, Antiquity films served to strengthen national and cultural identity, apparent for example through the leading role played by Italy in this film sector, and also through the success during the silent-film era of *Cabiria*, a cinematic depiction of the confrontation between Rome and Carthage [7. 81-84]. The Romanian productions depicting the Dacians as proto-Romanians (*Battle of the Titans against Rome* 1966; *The Tyrant* 1968) demonstrate this national tradition, which is analogous to the preference for medieval sagas in English and German epic films about the exploits of knighthood [7. 136-159; 24. 94-96]. Although its second part was an international co-production, the filming of the Euripides trilogy (*Elektra/The Trojan Women/Iphigenia*) was in Greek hands: it was directed by the Cypriot Michael Cacoyannis, most of the cast was Greek, and the music for *Elektra* was written by Mikis Theodorakis [28. 168-170; 18. 844]. In the United States, Biblical films and epics showing Christians doing battle against the Roman Empire contributed to the creation of a cultural identity based on Christianity and democracy [14. 49; 16; 24. 78-79; 37. 140]. The interest shown by both the United States and England in the subject of the Roman Empire reflects a fascination with the development of

empires and the forces that threaten their existence that is rooted in those countries' own history [38]. Such films also contain hidden messages, as when the cinematic Marcus Aurelius speaks of a multi-cultural Roman society in the film *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, echoing the American concept of the 'Great Society' during the Johnson administration in the context of the civil-rights movement, or in the case of references to the Cold War [37. 145f.]. The vision of a united world following Alexander the Great contained in the uncut version of *Cleopatra* 1963 hints at American hopes for a solution to the enmity between NATO and the Warsaw Pact [38. 100], while the idea of a corrupt Eastern Bloc is reflected in numerous films when the ancient Orient is transformed and reinterpreted in terms of contemporary Turkish/Arabian circumstances. Antiquity films of the post-war period sought to convey to the female audience in particular the importance of the role of 'wife' (less frequently that of 'mother'), thus imposing social discipline on women while offering them a character with whom they might identify (the woman who conforms to norms) [34. 84-89].

The economic interests behind these Antiquity films should not be underestimated. Compared with the reception and reproduction of ancient content in the media of other eras, the film industry is a far more effective multiplier. *Cleopatra* 1934 initiated quite an advertising campaign: department stores established separate departments and display windows advertising for clothing and cosmetic articles in the style of the film. This advertising was aimed at the female half of the population, with the goal of inducing them to see the film as well as to purchase goods. The same method was revived for *Cleopatra* 1963: the print media in particular, most prominently *Vogue* [10. 121-124; 38. 102], set the standard for fashion à la Cleopatra, as portrayed by Elizabeth Taylor, and the actress reinforced the message by commissioning her costume designer to recreate her film costume for her wedding to Richard Burton [26. 44]. After films are shown in the cinema, the ancient world is used by other industries in advertising for their own purposes, and female figures are eroticized as a part of marketing strategy. Even low-budget Italian films have made a great deal of money, not least as a result of their many showings at home and abroad (cf. the contemporary German film magazines *Illustrierte Film-Bühne* and *Das Neue Film-Programm*) [31. 403]. The fact that the modern protagonist in the film *The English Patient* (USA 1996) carried a copy of Herodotus' *Histories* around with him, in which he kept letters and from which he quoted, actually led to a dramatic rise in demand for that ancient historian's work.

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