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University of Southampton

Faculty of Humanities

Film

Heroic Masculinities: Evolution and Hybridisation in the *Peplum* Genre

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

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HEROIC MASCULINITIES: EVOLUTION AND HYBRIDISATION IN THE *PEPLUM*
GENRE

by Daniel Patrick O'Brien

My area of research is the *peplum*, a cycle of mythological action films produced in Italy from 1957 to 1965, and its influence on both contemporaneous and subsequent filmic depictions of mythical heroes. I argue that this genre is a significant cinematic form which has been marginalised in the fields of film and cultural studies. My thesis reassesses the *peplum* in terms of its representations of heroic masculinity and the ways in which these relate to wider debates on masculinity. Critics such as Richard Whitehall (1963), Gianni Rondolino (1979) and Richard Dyer (1996, 1997) have noted that the cycle began with *Le fatiche di Ercole* (*Hercules*, Pietro Francisci, 1958), which established the *peplum* ground rules. Taking this film as my starting point, I trace the evolution of the genre through a series of case studies, including *Romolo e Remo* (*Duel of the Titans*, Sergio Corbucci, 1961), which offers contrasting forms of heroic masculinity, and counter representations of Herculean masculinity in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), an American production made partly in response to the success of the *peplum*, and *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (*Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, Vittorio Cottafavi, 1961). I also discuss later reconfigurations of the *peplum* hero in the American-financed *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007), which draw on the iconography and aesthetics of the *peplum* to markedly different effect. Previous *peplum* scholarship has characterised the genre as endorsing the value of white male physical strength in the context of a reactionary patriarchal status quo. I argue that the depiction of masculinity in these films is more varied, problematic and contradictory than this over-generalised reading would suggest. It is my contention that the *peplum*'s diverse representations of masculinity offer a notable contribution to ongoing debates on maleness as centred on and expressed by the body—within film studies, academia and the wider culture—that has been largely unexplored and unappreciated. My re-evaluation of the *peplum* also underlines the cultural value of Italian and indeed European genre cinema, fields still overshadowed in film studies by the dominant Hollywood models.

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Declaration Of Authorship

I, Daniel Patrick O'Brien, declare that this thesis entitled **Heroic Masculinities: Evolution and Hybridisation in the *Peplum* Genre** and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:
 - Material from Chapters Two and Five is referenced in 'Peplum', *Directory of World Cinema: Italy*, ed. Louis Bayman (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2011) pp.176-199
 - Material from Chapter Two appears in a different form in 'Hercules Diminished? Parody, Differentiation, and Emulation in *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*', *Of Muscles and Men. Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. Michael G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2011) pp.187-202
 - Sections from Chapter Two appear in abridged form in 'Hercules versus Hercules: Variation and Continuation in Two Generations of Heroic Masculinity', *Popular Italian Cinema*, ed. Sergio Rigoletto and Louis Bayman (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) [forthcoming title; page references unknown]

Signed:

Date:

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Chapter One

Introduction

In *A Short History of the Movies*, first published in 1971, US scholar Gerald Mast argued that American investment in the Italian film industry had stimulated not only ‘art cinema’ but also ‘the cheap, trash films’.¹ For Mast, a prime example of the latter was the *peplum*,² a series of mythological action films produced in Italy from 1957 to 1965. He argued that the *peplum* represented an abandonment of qualities associated with early post-World War II Italian cinema—in terms of ideas, social comment, realistic observation and poetic imagery—pandering instead to mainstream film conventions and practices.³ In both form and content, the *peplum* revealed nothing of interest about the era of its production and reception, nor had it anything to offer subsequent debates in film and cultural studies. Mast’s views were perhaps not representative of 1970s English-language academic discourse on the *peplum*, but the absence of counter debates or debates of any kind during this period reflects a dismissive attitude towards this genre that has altered only gradually.⁴ In my estimation the *peplum* is a significant cinematic form which has influenced both contemporaneous and subsequent US filmic depictions of mythical heroes. My thesis reassesses the genre in terms of its representations of heroic masculinity and the ways in which these relate to wider debates on masculinity. I will develop and challenge previous *peplum* scholarship and demonstrate how aspects of this genre have been over-generalised or neglected and, moreover, why it remains important fifty years on despite its marginalisation in academic discourses. Limited conceptions of *peplum* masculinity have contributed to the genre’s negligible standing in film studies and restricted its engagement

¹ Mast, *A Short History of the Movies. Second Edition* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976) p.364

² Mast uses the term “‘spectacle” films”, appearing to question even this attribute (Mast, 1976, p.364)

³ Mast, 1976, p.365

⁴ As recently as 2011, US academic Frank Burke argued that the *peplum* has still not attracted much scholarly attention, an assessment I would class as only a slight exaggeration (Burke, ‘The Italian Sword-and-Sandal Film From *Fabiola* (1949) to *Hercules and The Captive Women* (1961): Texts and Contexts’, *Popular Italian Cinema. Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*, ed. Flavia Brizio-Skov (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011, pp.17-51) p.17).

with and relevance to multidisciplinary studies of masculinity. It is my contention that the *peplum*'s diverse representations of masculinity offer a notable contribution to ongoing debates on maleness as centred on and expressed by the body—within film studies, academia and the wider culture—that has been largely unexplored and unappreciated. My re-evaluation of the *peplum* also underlines the cultural value of Italian and indeed European genre cinema, fields still overshadowed in film studies by the dominant Hollywood models.

The *peplum* in the late 1950s spearheaded the resurgence of Italian popular cinema in the international market, achieving a level of exposure and commercial success not experienced since the silent era. According to contemporary accounts the most successful film at the British box-office in 1960 was *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (*Hercules Unchained*, Pietro Francisci, 1959),⁵ an unprecedented achievement for a dubbed low-budget import.⁶ The *pepla* were structured around the bodies of their leading men, cast as heroes from Greco-Roman legend or ancient history. The stars were usually bodybuilders, with little or no acting experience, and dressed in minimal costumes that emphasised their physiques, their characters placed in narratives of contest, conflict and ordeal. Critics and academics such as Richard Whitehall (1963), Gianni Rondolino (1979) and Richard Dyer (1996, 1997) have noted that the cycle began with *Le fatiche di Ercole* (*Hercules*, Francisci, 1958), starring champion US bodybuilder Steve Reeves. *Hercules* established the *peplum* ground rules, foregrounding the muscular male body as an instrument of self-reliance, liberation and moral authority. Taking this film as my starting point, I trace the evolution of the genre through a series of case studies, including counter representations of Herculean masculinity and later reconfigurations of the *peplum* hero in the contexts of the 1980s and the post-millennial revivals of the classical epic. I have chosen the term *peplum* to identify and group these films rather than the alternative 'sword and sandal' label, which derives from US-led discourse, for several reasons. As discussed below, the *peplum*

⁵ Source: Anon, 'The Year', *Films and Filming*, January 1961, volume 7, number 4, p.29. This achievement was also covered by the mainstream press, including an unsigned article, "'Hercules' the favourite" that appeared in *The Guardian* (8 December 1960, p.21).

⁶ *Kine Weekly* lists four other *pepla* in its 1960 survey of UK box-office hits: *La battaglia di Maratona* (*The Giant of Marathon*, Jacques Tourneur, 1959), *Il terrore dei barbari* (*Goliath and the Barbarians*, Carlo Campogalliani, 1959), *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, Mario Bonnard and Sergio Leone, 1959) and *Nel segno di Roma* (*Sign of the Gladiator*, Guido Brignone, 1959). Reprinted in Robert Murphy (ed.), *Sixties British Cinema* (Canterbury: University of Kent at Canterbury, 1986) p.189.

category originated with French critics during the early 1960s and predates the term sword and sandal.⁷ *Peplum*, I suggest, is a relatively neutral label in that it does not invoke so readily the evaluative and often negative associations of ‘sword and sandal’, whether low-brow, high-camp or ‘trash’. In this introductory chapter I contextualise my approach to the *peplum* in relation to previous academic discourses. I clarify the *peplum*’s status as a viable genre category and outline the debates relating to concepts of masculinity that form a major part of my argument. I also introduce and engage with key arguments relating specifically to masculinity and the *peplum* and explain their relevance to my thesis. I then outline my methodological approach and provide a summary of the thesis structure.

The earliest significant debates on the *peplum* originated in France in the early 1960s, in the critical journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. These were rooted in *auteur* theory, highlighting director Vittorio Cottafavi⁸ and his work on *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (*Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, 1961),⁹ and proved influential on British and Italian film criticism.¹⁰ While Cottafavi retained a measure of his 1960s currency in subsequent English-language critical and, to a lesser extent, academic discourse¹¹ he did not achieve a lasting *auteur* status outside France and Italy.¹² 1960s critics also discussed the genre in terms of its

⁷ Writing in the early 1990s, Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau employed the term *peplum* partly because ‘no similar common term has emerged in theory or criticism written in English’ and I argue this remains the case in 2012. (Dyer and Vincendeau (eds), *Popular European Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.179).

⁸ Active as a feature film director from the early 1940s, Cottafavi worked in various genres, such as comedy, melodrama and the swashbuckler. From the late 1950s, he made a series of classical Roman epics, though his only other *peplum*, as I understand the concept, is *La vendetta di Ercole* (*Goliath and the Dragon*, 1960), which has received negligible English-language critical and academic attention.

⁹ In the May 1962 edition of *Cahiers du Cinéma* Luc Moullet compared Cottafavi to Hollywood directors Stanley Kubrick, Nicholas Ray and Anthony Mann and praised *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* for its moral debate, contemporary relevance and pointed satire (Moullet. ‘La victoire d’Ercole’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* Volume XXII, No.131, May 1962, pp.39-42, p.40).

¹⁰ The British journal *Monthly Film Bulletin* expressed an appreciation for *Hercule Conquers Atlantis* focused on Cottafavi’s ‘celebrated *mise en scène*’ (Anon, ‘Hercules Conquers Atlantis’, *Monthly Film Bulletin* Vol. XXIX, Nos. 336-347, 1962, p.112). *Films and Filming* critic Richard Whitehall also praised this aspect of the film (Whitehall, ‘Son of Spartacus’, *Films and Filming*, June 1963, Vol.9, No.9, p.33). In the mid-1960s, Italian film historian and critic Gianni Rondolino also followed the French example, acknowledging their ‘discovery’ of Cottafavi, and framing his discussion of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* in terms of the director’s perceived authorship (Rondolino, ed., *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965* [Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore, 1979] p.186. My translation).

¹¹ Reviewing the UK home video release of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, *Monthly Film Bulletin* critic Tom Milne discussed Cottafavi’s manipulation of *peplum* clichés (Milne, ‘Hercules Conquers Atlantis’, *MFB* January 1986, Vol.53, No.624, p.19). Writing in the mid 1990s, Dyer noted that Cottafavi was still regarded as ‘the *auteur* of the *peplum*’ (Dyer, *The Companion to Italian Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, with James Hay and Gianni Volpi [London: British Film Institute, 1996] p.39).

¹² Recent publications on Cottafavi include the Italian-language book-length study *Ai poeti non si spara. Vittorio Cottafavi tra cinema e televisione*, ed. Adriano Aprà, Giulio Bursi and Simone Starace (Bologna:

commercial success, domestic and international. For example, British critic Richard Whitehall identified social and political factors at work, suggesting the *peplum*'s uncomplicated heroics and black-and-white moral certainties suited the public mood at a time of global Cold War tensions and nuclear anxiety.¹³ Italian critic Goffredo Fofi suggested in 1967 that the *peplum* benefited from fortuitous timing, arriving when several traditional genres highlighting heroic men of action were in decline, notably the Hollywood 'B' western, and, in Italy, the *cappa e spada* or 'cloak and sword' film.¹⁴ For the most part, English-language critical commentary on the *peplum* declined along with the genre itself after the mid-1960s and scholarly interest did not achieve significant momentum for another 25 years.

Academic debates on the *peplum* should be placed within the wider contexts of Italian and European cinema, though the latter remains a problematic area of study, not least in terms of ready definition.¹⁵ Until the 1980s, academic constructions of European film were based predominantly around notions of art cinema, emphasising high culture, elitism, significant movements (such as Italian neo-realism and French *nouvelle vague*) and *auteurism*.¹⁶ David Bordwell's 1979 essay on art cinema characterised it as 'a distinct branch of the cinematic institution' that departed from the classical Hollywood narrative mode and promoted realism over the escapism associated with the latter.¹⁷ This definition of European cinema was partly a reaction against the dominance of popular Hollywood cinema in terms of both film production (and distribution) and film studies.¹⁸ Writing in 1981, Steve Neale argued the term 'art cinema' had not been sufficiently defined, elaborated or analysed but recognised that it offered a space 'in which an indigenous

Cineteca di Bologna, 2010). This collection of critical articles and interviews includes Luc Moullet's 1962 essay from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, translated by Aprà (pp.82-85).

¹³ Whitehall, 'Days of Strife and Nights of Orgy', *Films and Filming*, March 1963, Volume 9, Number 6, pp.8-9

¹⁴ Fofi, 'Maciste sugli schermi', *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965*, ed. Gianni Rondolino (Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore, 1979) p.i. My translation. **Note:** This essay appears on unnumbered pages between numbered pages 253 and 254. I have referenced the pages cited with roman numerals.

¹⁵ See, for example, Catherine Fowler (ed.), *The European Cinema Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p.1; Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds), *Alternative Europe. Eurotrash and Exploitation Cinema Since 1945* (London: Wallflower, 2004) pp.1-2

¹⁶ Fowler, 2002, p.4

¹⁷ Bordwell, 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', *The European Cinema Reader*, ed. Catherine Fowler (London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp.94-102) pp.94, 95

¹⁸ Fowler, 2002, p.5

cinema can develop and make its critical and economic mark'.¹⁹ Low culture, in the form of popular and/or genre cinema, was invariably excluded. Jill Forbes and Sarah Street concur that while art cinema remains contentious as a category, it has proved useful as a marketing tool in terms of the international distribution and promotion of European cinema.²⁰

Until the early 1990s, European films judged to fall outside the categories of art or *auteur* cinema received little attention in English-language film and cultural studies. One of the first attempts to counter this gap in scholarship was the 1989 Popular European Cinema Conference, an international event organised by Ginette Vincendeau and Richard Dyer and held at the University of Warwick in England. The introduction to the conference catalogue noted the longstanding and deep-rooted tendency to equate popular film with Hollywood and European cinema with avant-garde, art and *auteur* film, and proposed a radically different approach, declaring European popular film 'both culturally significant and fully as capable of high aesthetic achievement as Hollywood'.²¹ A selection of the papers presented formed the basis for a 1992 book, which developed the argument that popular European film, long regarded as second-rate, must be re-evaluated as both art and social document.²² Vincendeau and Dyer state that the term 'popular' can refer to commercial success and/or artefacts produced by or in tune with 'the people'.²³ While these market and anthropological approaches are by no means unproblematic, they offer viable alternatives to debates on European film confined to art cinema, which risk playing down or erasing stylistic and cultural differences between films from each country.²⁴ Around the same time, Pierre Sorlin's *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939-1990* offered a comparative social history which drew its primary material from the cinema,²⁵ making no particular distinction between art film and popular film. Sorlin characterises cinema as a whole as 'a popular means of entertainment'²⁶ and it is arguable that in

¹⁹ Neale, 'Art Cinema as Institution', *The European Cinema Reader*, ed. Catherine Fowler (London and New York: Routledge, 2002, pp.103-120) pp.103, 104

²⁰ Forbes and Street, *European Cinema* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000) p.40

²¹ Vincendeau and Dyer (eds), *Popular European Cinema Conference. Catalogue* (Warwick: European Humanities Research Centre/Film Studies, University of Warwick, 1989) p.i

²² Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992, p.11

²³ Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992, p.2

²⁴ Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992, p.8

²⁵ Sorlin, *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939-1990* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) p.5

²⁶ Sorlin, 1991, p.5

practice the art/popular categories overlap to such an extent that the validity—and usefulness—of this divide is open to question.²⁷ As Dimitris Eleftheriotis notes, art cinema rarely, if ever, occupies an idealised, non-commercial sphere, any more than popular film is lacking entirely in an aesthetic sense, sophistication or creativity.²⁸ More recently, academic debates on all forms of European film (and television) have been cultivated and promoted by the European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (NECS), founded in 2006, which has run annual conferences since 2007.

As with European cinema, for a long time English-language discourses on Italian cinema defined it in narrow and highly selective terms. US scholar Sergio J. Pacifici, in his 1956 essay ‘Notes toward a Definition of Neo-Realism’, argued the movement had contributed toward the formation of a genuine Italian cinema,²⁹ and over the ensuing decades neo-realism remained a keystone for academic debates on Italian film. In *How to Read a Film*, first published in 1977, James Monaco characterised neo-realism as depicting ordinary, often working-class, lives and employing nonprofessional actors, unpolished technique (whether by aesthetic choice or financial necessity), a socio-political message and focusing on ideas rather than entertainment.³⁰ The movement also marked the emergence of major filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti and Roberto Rossellini,³¹ an *auteur* canon supplemented by figures such as Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni and Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose early work had links, direct or otherwise, to neo-realism. Writing in 1981, Neale identified neo-realism as ‘the very paradigm of Art Cinema’,³² linking both to Mast’s conception of innovative, socially relevant Italian cinema and the wider debates on European film in relation to art and popular cinema. While neo-realism’s status as a

²⁷ Angela Ndaliansis argues that from the 1960s onwards, art and mainstream cinema increasingly adopted each other’s conventions, the boundaries between them ever more porous (Ndaliansis, ‘Art Cinema’, *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. Pam Cook (London: BFI, 2007, pp.83-87) p.87).

²⁸ Eleftheriotis *Popular Cinemas of Europe* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001) p.73. See also Ndaliansis, 2007, p.84

²⁹ Pacifici, ‘Notes toward a Definition of Neo-Realism’, *Yale French Studies* 17, ed. Kenneth Douglas (New York, Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1965, pp.44-53) p.45. See also André Bazin’s 1948 essay ‘An Aesthetic of Reality: Neo-Realism’, published in an English language version in 1971, edited and translated by Hugh Gray.

³⁰ Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) p.253

³¹ Monaco, 1981, p.252. See also, for example, Gian Luigi Rondi, *Italian Cinema Today* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1966); Mast, 1976, pp.343-365.

³² Neale, 2002, p.113

coherent movement distinct from mainstream Italian cinema has been much debated,³³ its associated style, such as location-based filming, and narrative devices, including ellipses and open endings, were perceived to have ‘influenced the emergence of an international modernist cinema.’³⁴ As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes, if few neo-realist films were commercially successful, their international critical reputation and development of what was perceived as a distinctively Italian subject matter meant that ‘for many years “Italian cinema” was synonymous with the neo-realist production’.³⁵ If other aspects of Italian film were addressed, it was in relation to neo-realism. Pierre Leprohon’s pioneering study of Italian cinema, published in 1972, placed the movement in the wider context of the history of the Italian film industry and its relationship to the country’s political and social history and associated intellectual debates.³⁶ Peter Bondanella’s *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, first published in 1983, also contextualised neo-realism and its influences with an account of Italian film history from 1906 onwards, touching on key industrial, geographical, cultural and economic factors and highlighting the Italian cinema’s early global success.³⁷

With English-language studies of Italian cinema anchored around neo-realism and its associated *auteurs*, popular Italian film was relegated for many years to the periphery of debates on Italian art cinema or simply not mentioned at all. Leprohon proposed then dismissed a Golden Age of Italian silent film, notable for historical epics and other popular genres such as comedy and melodrama,³⁸ and subsequent studies made reference to the classical epics of the early twentieth century and their commercial success in both the

³³ See, for example, Richard Dyer, ‘Italian Cinema’, *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. Pam Cook (London: BFI, 2007, pp.231-232) p.232; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, ‘Italian Neo-realism’, *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. Pam Cook (London: BFI, 2007, pp.233-237) p.234

³⁴ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History. An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) p.423

³⁵ Nowell-Smith, 2007, p.233

³⁶ Leprohon, *The Italian Cinema* (translated by Roger Greaves and Oliver Stallybrass) (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972) p.8. **Note:** the original French-language version of the book was published in 1966, with the revised and updated English translation following six years later.

³⁷ Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*. (New York and London: Continuum, 2002) . See also Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Angela Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992). Liehm’s approach highlights neo-realism and its influence on international film culture. Dalle Vacche explores the reflection, translation and perception of Italian culture in Italian cinema, emphasising the canonical films and filmmakers.

³⁸ Leprohon, 1972, pp.16, 30, 61. Leprohon concludes that Italian productions of this era made negligible aesthetic and nil technical contribution to silent cinema as a whole.

domestic and foreign markets.³⁹ There were few detailed studies of Italian popular film, with rare exceptions such as Christopher Frayling's 1981 book on spaghetti westerns, which prompted, in part at least, a gradual re-evaluation of the genre and, in particular, made a case for director Sergio Leone as an *auteur*.⁴⁰ By the mid-1990s the growth of scholarship on European popular cinema was reflected in debates on Italian film. For example, Sorlin's *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996* examines the shifting relationship between Italian society and Italian cinema, referencing both art and popular film,⁴¹ and Christopher Wagstaff argues in *Hollywood and Europe* that as early as the late 1940s the US dominance of Italian cinemas was countered by a resurgence of popular genres, including melodrama, musical, comedy and adventure.⁴² As with popular European film in general, the emergence of Italian popular cinema as a recognised subject within film studies has proved a gradual process.⁴³

Michèle Lagny notes how, prior to the early 1990s, the handful of scholarly debates on the *peplum* were either entirely dismissive or focused on the genre's perceived ideological unsoundness.⁴⁴ Leprohon saw the *peplum* as a commercially successful but otherwise unremarkable revival of the costume-adventure film, 'a perennial feature of the Italian cinema'.⁴⁵ Angela Dalle Vacche concurs with Mast that the *peplum* is a regressive and reactionary form of filmmaking, in marked contrast to neo-realism and the recognised Italian *auteurs*.⁴⁶ These attitudes have persisted into the 21st century. Maggie Günsberg, discussing gender and genre in Italian popular cinema, also characterises the *peplum* as an

³⁹ See, for example, Bondanella, 2002, pp.3-6 ;Neale, 2002, p.111

⁴⁰ Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns. Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

⁴¹ Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). See also Mary P. Wood, *Italian Cinema* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005).

⁴² Wagstaff, 'Italian genre films in the world market', *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945-95*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci (London: British Film Institute, 1998, pp.74-85) pp.75-76

⁴³ In May 2009, 20 years after the Warwick conference on popular European film, King's College, University of London hosted an international conference on popular Italian cinema. Keynote speakers included Richard Dyer and Christopher Wagstaff. Recent publications in this area include Flavia Brizio-Skov (ed.), *Popular Italian Cinema. Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), and Louis Bayman (ed.), *Directory of World Cinema: Italy* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2011).

⁴⁴ Lagny, 'Popular Taste: The peplum' (translation: Peter Graham), *Popular European Cinema*, ed. Richard Dyer and GINETTE Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992, pp.163-180) p.163

⁴⁵ Leprohon, 1972, p.174

⁴⁶ Dalle Vacche, *The Body in the Mirror: Shapes of History in Italian Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p.52. See also, for example, Burke, 2011, p.27

intrinsically reactionary form that promotes traditional gender, race and class values.⁴⁷ Film historian Mira Liehm argued in the mid-1980s that the *peplum* reflects and embodies economic, social and ideological realities of its era, a point I address below, but this more measured assessment of the genre is a brief digression from an agenda still based around the neo-realist movement.⁴⁸

Despite the rise of scholarly interest in Italian popular film, in terms of *peplum*-specific discourses no particular school of thought has dominated the field at any given time. The mid-1990s saw one of the first book-length English-language works on the genre, Patrick Lucanio's *With Fire and Sword*, published in 1994.⁴⁹ A US academic, Lucanio emphasised the *peplum*'s status as a neglected genre⁵⁰ and discussed its US promotion, box-office success and the casting of bodybuilders.⁵¹ Most of the book, however, consists of a catalogue of *pepla* (and related titles) released in the US and his approach offers little in the way of sustained critical or theoretical discussion. The genre's use of bodybuilders has been debated further (Steven Cohan, 1997; Maria Wyke, 2002; Frank Burke, 2011; Maria Elena D'Amelio, 2011), in a wider historical-political context that links the *peplum* to the post-World War II Americanisation of Italy.⁵² Elsewhere, academic histories of Italian cinema (Bondanella, 1983 and 2009), among other texts, follow Leprohon's lead in noting the genre's commercial success at home and abroad, especially in the crucial US market.⁵³ There are debates over the local audience profile (Lagny, 1992; Sorlin, 1996; Burke, 2011), in terms of class, education and literacy, though the scant extant documentary evidence is reflected in the polarised conclusions.⁵⁴ The *peplum* has also been placed in its

⁴⁷ Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*. (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.7

⁴⁸ Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) p.183. See also Burke, 2011, p.18.

⁴⁹ Lucanio, *With Fire and Sword: Italian Spectacles on American Screens, 1958-68* (Metuchen, New Jersey and London: Scarecrow Press, 1994)

⁵⁰ Lucanio, 1994, p.vii

⁵¹ Lucanio, 1994, pp.vii, 22

⁵² See Cohan, *Masked Men. Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) p.182; Wyke, 'Herculean Muscle!: The Classicizing Rhetoric of Body Building', *Constructions of the Classical Body.*, ed. James I. Porter (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp.355-379) p.370; Burke, 2011, pp.29, 41-47; D'Amelio, 'Hercules, Politics, and Movies', *Of Muscles and Men. Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. Michael Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2011, pp.15-27) p.16

⁵³ Bondanella, 2002, p.159; Bondanella. *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York and London: Continuum, 2009) p.167. See also Thompson and Bordwell, 1994, p.423

⁵⁴ See Lagny, 1992, p.163; Sorlin, 1996, p.125; Burke, 2011, p.31

local industrial context and identified by Bondanella (1983), among others, as characteristic of the industry at the time, a ‘faddish’ genre created by numerous and rapid imitations of a popular original, in this instance *Hercules*.⁵⁵ Tim Bergfelder (2000) locates the *peplum* in a broader context of European co-productions which enabled film-makers to ‘boost productivity, to share production costs and to increase the number of cinema-goers’.⁵⁶ Sheldon Hall (2002) examines the US promotion and distribution of the *peplum* in terms of the aggressive mass marketing and saturation release of product perceived as second-rate that exploited public curiosity and gullibility for rapid commercial gain.⁵⁷

As the above examples demonstrate, there are various strands of academic discourse relating to the *peplum*, which I will reference as they become relevant to my main argument. I feel, however, that this genre has not been mapped comprehensively, especially in regard to its representation of masculinity. Lagny regards the *peplum* as a valorisation of the male body⁵⁸ and fellow academics such as Dyer and Günsberg have developed this aspect of *peplum* scholarship in terms of gender, race and fascism, the last of these linked with then-recent Italian history.⁵⁹ Dyer’s 1997 book *White* examines depictions of whiteness in western visual culture and the chapter ‘The white man’s muscles’⁶⁰ discusses the various factors that contributed to the *peplum*’s construction of ‘the idealised white man’.⁶¹ As noted, Günsberg argues that gender representation in Italian popular cinema is informed to a large extent by conservative patriarchal ideology⁶² (a situation by no means exclusive to Italy), and discusses the *peplum* body in terms of an

⁵⁵ Bondanella, 2002, p.161. Wood makes more or less the same point: ‘Trendspotting successful subjects, names, themes and stars resulted in quickly-made similar films, until public interest was seen to wane’ (Wood, 2005, p.11). Bondanella argues that faddish genres and short-term production strategies hindered the development of a stable industry infrastructure, product and market (Bondanella, 2002, p.161). See also Christopher Wagstaff, ‘A Forkful of Westerns’, *Popular European Cinema*, ed. Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992, pp.245-261) p.250

⁵⁶ Bergfelder, ‘The Nation Vanishes. European co-productions and popular genre formula in the 1950s and 1960s’, *Cinema & Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000, pp.139-152) p.141

⁵⁷ Hall, ‘Tall Revenue Features: The Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster’, *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: BFI Publishing, 2002, pp.11-26) p.14. *New York Times* critic Richard Nason noted the ‘deafening barrage of publicity’ accompanying the release of *Hercules*, adding: ‘At this point in the history of film promotion it seems hardly necessary to state that the picture bears out little of the breathless excitement of its advance building’ (source *New York Times*, July 23, 1959, nytimes.com, accessed 13 September 2011).

⁵⁸ Lagny, 1992, p.170

⁵⁹ Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997); Günsberg, 2005.

⁶⁰ Dyer, 1997, pp.145-183

⁶¹ Dyer, 1997, p.165

⁶² Günsberg, 2005, p.1

idealized masculine physicality.⁶³ Thus the genre is read as a valorisation of white male strength,⁶⁴ physical and moral, set in contrast and opposition to femininity and non-whiteness, qualities marked as fundamentally different and by their nature inherently inferior.

Aspects of this representation remain insufficiently addressed, reflecting too restrictive an approach that reiterates key points without developing or challenging them. The depiction of heroic manliness in these films is more varied, problematic and contradictory than previous readings suggest, undermining the concept of a singular, mono-faceted *peplum* masculinity that is readily identified and categorised.⁶⁵ The casting of bodybuilders undercuts the presentation of masculinity as an ostensibly natural, fixed and unchanging essence, emphasizing instead its status as a cultural construction perpetuated and performed in accordance with and furtherance of the dictates of a dominant ideology. Representing manliness in terms of the displayed male body also invokes undercurrents of passivity and homoeroticism⁶⁶ that the *peplum* attempts to counter through various methods. Subsequent cinematic representations of heroic masculinity are marked by similar contradictions and the resultant tensions are reflected in both the variation and continuation in evidence from Steve Reeves' Hercules to Gerard Butler's Leonidas in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007).

⁶³ Günsberg, 2005, p.110

⁶⁴ Leon Hunt, in his discussion of male epics, takes a different approach, citing the *peplum* as a celebration of male narcissism (Hunt, 'What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic', *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, ed. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993, pp.65-83) p.70).

⁶⁵ This characterisation of the *peplum* hero as essentially constant and unvarying is found in more recent scholarship on the genre. See, for example, Andrew B.R. Elliott, 'From Maciste to Maximus and Company', *Of Muscles and Men. Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. Michael G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2011, pp.58-74) pp.60, 61

⁶⁶ This aspect of the *peplum* is acknowledged in passing by scholars such as Lagny, 1992, p.171, and Cohan, 1997, p.182.

Genre

The *peplum* label derives from a garment often worn in these films. For some French writers any film set in the ancient past qualifies as a *peplum* and this sense of the word has become an accepted part of the French language.⁶⁷ Lagny offers a broad definition, ‘mythico-historical spectaculars’, that falls into line with this conception of the *peplum*, identifying two ‘golden ages’ of the genre, the silent era (1914-1925) and from 1949, beginning with the Roman epic *Fabiola* (Alessandro Blasetti, 1949), to the early 1960s.⁶⁸ In my view this definition is too broad to be of practical use, bracketing *Hercules* alongside big-budget Hollywood films such as *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) and *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963), with which it has more differences than similarities. For the purposes of this thesis I define *peplum* as a mythological, historical-mythological or pseudo-mythological action movie, usually based on Greco-Roman legend, produced in Italy between 1957 and 1965, with the participation of at least one Italian production company, a predominantly Italian cast and crew, and a bodybuilder cast in the starring role.⁶⁹ However, while the word ‘*peplum*’ is an established and widely accepted term for *Hercules* and its successors, its status as a genre category requires both clarification and qualification.

The concept of genre is itself much contested, especially in relation to the cinema, and subject to many definitions, whether overlapping or seemingly exclusive. Steve Neale has argued that many of the major early English-language works on film genre date from the late 1960s and early 1970s,⁷⁰ partly in response and reaction to film criticism that focused

⁶⁷ The *Collins Robert French-English Dictionary* (Glasgow and New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005) defines *peplum* as a film set in antiquity (p.730)

⁶⁸ Lagny, 1992, p.163

⁶⁹ There are exceptions to the bodybuilder rule, notably Swiss actor Roland Carey in *I giganti della Tessaglia* (*The Giants of Thessaly*, Riccardo Freda, 1961), Hollywood ‘B’ star Rory Calhoun in *Il Colosso di Rodi* (*The Colossus of Rhodes*, Sergio Leone, 1961) and former bit player Richard Harrison in *Perseo L’invincibile* (*Perseus Against the Monster*, Alberto De Martino, 1963). Other factors that characterise the *peplum* include the use of colour and one of the anamorphic widescreen processes of the time, such as Dyaliscope, CinemaScope and Technirama.

⁷⁰ Neale (ed.), *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood* (London: BFI Publishing, 2002) p.1. Neale cites Edward Buscombe, ‘The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema’, *Screen*, vol.11, no.2 (1970), pp.33-45; Tom Ryall, ‘Teaching through Genre’, *Screen Education* no.17 (1975/6), pp.27-33, and Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Genre* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974).

on *auteur* theory.⁷¹ As Christine Gledhill notes, the latter aimed to demonstrate the presence of artists in mainstream US film production despite rather than in relation to industrial conditions and genre criticism was spurred, in part at least, by growing dissatisfaction with an *auteur* approach that treated popular art as high culture.⁷² Given the time and context of their production, these pioneering genre studies ‘inevitably drew for their examples on the films of the studio era or the period of transition in which they were working’,⁷³ not least because the *auteur* studies with which they engaged were largely US-centred. Concerned primarily with Hollywood product from the 1920s onwards, debates on genre tend to identify a series of distinct categories, such as the western, the musical, comedy, gangster films, horror and science fiction. Richard Maltby notes how a given genre may exhibit distinctive ‘thematic, iconographic, narrative, and political propensities’.⁷⁴ For example, a western may be identified by its setting (historical and geographical), costumes, props, music, sound effects, character types, story elements and thematic or ideological concerns.

While the division of films according to their appointed genres suggests a relatively straightforward process of categorisation, generic purity is a theoretical construct rather than an actuality, as Barry Keith Grant notes: ‘Genre movies have always been hybrid, combinative in practice.’⁷⁵ Thus *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) can be labelled a historical drama (the backdrop of the Old South and the end of an era), a war film (the American Civil War) and a melodrama (the tempestuous life and loves of the heroine), drawing on a number of genres rather than belonging exclusively to just one. Concepts of genre also draw on extra-filmic factors, a process described by Neale as ‘inter-textual relay’, involving the circulation of generic images, labels, terms and names across various media, whether studio publicity, exhibitors’ advertising campaigns, fan magazines or press reviews.⁷⁶ Rick Altman links filmic and extra-filmic elements, arguing that genre can be viewed as a quadripartite construct involving a blueprint, ‘a formula that precedes,

⁷¹ Neale, 2000, p.10. Examples include Robin Wood’s book-length study of director Howard Hawks, first published in 1968. See also, for example, Thompson and Bordwell, 1994, p.493

⁷² Gledhill, ‘History of Genre Criticism’, *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. Pam Cook (London: BFI, 2007, pp.252-259) p.252

⁷³ Neale, 2002, p.1

⁷⁴ Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) p.123

⁷⁵ Grant, *Film Genre. From Iconography to Ideology* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2007) p.23

⁷⁶ Neale, 2000, p.40

programmes and patterns industry production’, a structure, ‘the formal framework on which individual films are founded’, a label, ‘the name of a category central to the decisions and communications of distributors and exhibitors’, and a contract, ‘the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience’.⁷⁷ Thus a western can be characterised as a cinematic narrative consisting of distinct and standardised ingredients but is equally a film identified, marketed, exhibited and received as a ‘western’. In the case of *Gone With the Wind*, the promotion and reviews could emphasise various aspects of the film—the passionate yet ill-fated romance, the star pairing of Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, the lavish production values, the Technicolor spectacle, the bestselling source novel—which contributed to shaping its generic identity.

Neale argues that genres consist not only of films but also of ‘specific systems of expectation and hypothesis’ on the part of the spectator.⁷⁸ These systems give the spectator a means of recognizing and understanding the films they watch, involving what Neale terms ‘regimes of verisimilitude’.⁷⁹ Neale identifies two types of verisimilitude, generic and social or cultural. Some genres appeal to cultural verisimilitude, such as the gangster, crime or war film, invoking notions of realism. This links with Barry Langford’s concept of ‘unmarked verisimilitudes’, such as the laws of physics, ‘whose observance can simply be taken for granted and establishes the continuity of the generic world with that of the spectator.’⁸⁰ Thus while a gangster film may contain elements far removed from the experiences of most viewers, it operates in a recognisably ‘real’ world and will not introduce aspects contrary to this realism, such as the protagonists being invulnerable to bullets. Other genres, Neale argues, such as science fiction and gothic horror, make little or no appeal to authenticity, operating largely in terms of generic verisimilitude.⁸¹ Suspending or flouting the laws of science or nature, as Langford notes, ‘may form a basic and recognised element of the verisimilitude of an outer-space science fiction film.’⁸² I contend that all genres invoke at least an element of authenticity, if not realism, if only as a point of

⁷⁷ Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999) p.14

⁷⁸ Neale, ‘Questions of Genre’, *Screen*, Volume 31, 1, Spring 1990, pp.45-66, p.46. See also Grant, 2007, p.30

⁷⁹ Neale, 1990, p.46

⁸⁰ Langford, 2005, p.15

⁸¹ Neale, 1990, p.47

⁸² Langford, 2005, pp.15-16

departure. Nevertheless, I concur with Neale that it is these generically verisimilar elements of the film that ‘constitute its pleasure’ and attract audiences.⁸³

Maltby identifies problematic aspects in some areas of genre theory, such as an excessive focus on highly selective examples of Hollywood product⁸⁴ and a critical approach that understands genre very differently from the film industry itself, disregarding the latter’s categories and introducing new alternatives such as *film noir*, discussed below.⁸⁵ This partiality of research and the incompatibility of terms are exacerbated by the fact that components such as the industry, economics and audiences are largely disregarded.⁸⁶ Whatever these constraints and limitations, however, genres, generic formulae and generic hybrids are useful critical tools⁸⁷ and film genre should be recognised as ‘a multi-faceted phenomenon’⁸⁸ that extends far beyond a supposedly neutral, objective listing of film types.

Genre theory and the *peplum*

There is a case for arguing that the *peplum* does not qualify as a genre category as the term is usually or widely understood. It is notable that contemporary Italian critics had no all-inclusive term equivalent to *peplum*.⁸⁹ Italian film historian and critic Gianni Rondolino, writing in 1967, divided the films into various categories: *mitologico* (mythological), *storico* (historical dramas), *storico romanzato* (romanticized historical dramas), and

⁸³ Neale, 1990, p.48

⁸⁴ Cited in Neale, 2000, p.252

⁸⁵ Maltby, 1995, p.134

⁸⁶ Cited in Neale, 2000, p.253

⁸⁷ Neale, 2000, p.253

⁸⁸ Neale, 2002, p.2

⁸⁹ Arthur J. Pomeroy cites *sandaloni* as the Italian term for the genre (Pomeroy, ‘*Then It Was Destroyed by the Volcano.*’ *The Ancient World in Film and Television.* (London: Duckworth, 2008) p.29). Presumably, this derives from the Italian word *sandalo*, or sandal, linking with the US term ‘sword and sandal’. However, Pomeroy does not discuss the etymology of *sandaloni* or cite examples of its use in Italian-language promotion, journalism, criticism or scholarship. It does not appear to have been widely acknowledged or adopted, certainly outside Italy, especially in comparison to the term *peplum*.

*avventuroso*⁹⁰ (adventure films), linking to Maltby's comment on terms devised by critics that bear little or no relation to those employed by the industry. There appears to be an element of arbitrariness or even confusion in this cataloguing system. *Romolo e Remo* (*Duel of the Titans*, Sergio Corbucci, 1961), based on the myth of the founding of Rome, is listed as a *storico* film. *La guerra di Troia* (*The Trojan War*, Giorgio Ferroni, 1961) is a *storico* film, while its sequel, *La leggenda di Enea* (*War of the Trojans*,⁹¹ Giorgio Venturini, 1962), is a *mitologico* film.⁹² Fofi suggests that a confusion of mythological and pseudo-historical strands were grouped into one undifferentiated mass and the listing cited above bears this out to an extent.⁹³ In academic discourse, Bergfelder suggests that 'unlike "classic" Hollywood genres, European popular films of this period [the 1950s and 1960s] conformed only vaguely to distinctive generic iconographies'.⁹⁴ Mary P. Wood echoes Fofi's suggestion that the *peplum* represents a *filone*—a strand or vein of similar films—as opposed to a genre proper.⁹⁵ The films could be divided further into sub-*filoni*, with stories set in a Roman, Greek, Carthaginian or Egyptian historical past or a pre-historic mythical backdrop.⁹⁶ This is an interesting point yet lacks a clear distinction between *filone* and genre. Wagstaff argues along broader though not dissimilar lines that the term *peplum* should also be applied to 'films about classical history, biblical times, the early and late Middle Ages, Vikings, the Renaissance, Cavaliers, pirates and such like'.⁹⁷

In terms of English-language commentary, the *peplum*'s status as a specific category can be traced back at least as far as 1963, when *Films and Filming* critic Ian Johnson expressed an appreciation for Italian spectaculars that offered 'musclemen and mythology',⁹⁸ characterising the genre in terms of its nationality, spectacle (body-centred or otherwise),⁹⁹ stars and nominal source material. Two decades on, Bondanella's academic history of

⁹⁰ Literally 'adventurous'

⁹¹ UK title; released in the US as *The Avenger*.

⁹² Rondolino, 1979, pp.134, 141, 143, 145, 151, 152, 185, 192, 208, 211, 221, 259, 276. Between 1958 and 1965, fifteen Italian films were released featuring *Ercole*, or Hercules in the title. Of these, seven are classed as mythological, six as adventures and two as comedies.

⁹³ Fofi, 1979, p.iii. My translation.

⁹⁴ Bergfelder, 2000, p.147

⁹⁵ Wood, 2005, p.37. See also Dalle Vache, 1992, p.55

⁹⁶ Wood, 2005, p.37

⁹⁷ Wagstaff, 1992, pp.251-252

⁹⁸ Johnson. 'Queen of the Nile' review, *Films and Filming*, July 1963, Volume 9, Number 10, p.29

⁹⁹ As Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale note, the term 'spectacle' is used rather loosely in relation to the cinema but usually denotes 'the presence of spectacular settings, action, and scenes' (source: Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2010) p.5).

Italian cinema described the *peplum* in similar terms as ‘neomythological...musclebound historical films’.¹⁰⁰ Having spearheaded the study of popular European film and promoted the *peplum* as a legitimate genre category, Dyer provided a clear, precise definition of the latter: ‘the series of Italian films produced between 1957 and 1965 centred on heroes drawn from classical antiquity played by US bodybuilders’.¹⁰¹ This conforms fairly closely to my definition, though in this instance there are obvious limitations. Focusing on the films’ nominal nationality, the time of their production, the source material and the nationality and background of the lead performers, Dyer excludes some key *peplum* titles from his formulation. On the most mundane level, not all of the *peplum* stars were American. There were two British stars, Reg Park and Joe Robinson, the former assuming the role of Hercules in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*¹⁰² and *Ercole al centro della terra* (*Hercules in the Centre of the Earth*,¹⁰³ Mario Bava, 1961). The Italian performers Sergio Ciani and Adriano Bellini became second-division *peplum* stars, billed respectively as ‘Alan Steel’ and ‘Kirk Morris’.¹⁰⁴ The cycle also saw the revival of Maciste, a character originating in the silent epic *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914), with no direct links to classical antiquity. Though little known outside Italy, Maciste would figure in more films than Hercules.¹⁰⁵

If *Hercules* is accepted as the first *peplum* film, it worked loosely from a series of cinematic blueprints dating back to the silent era (see Chapter Two), and then served itself as a blueprint for subsequent *pepla*. *Hercules* could also be characterised as a structure that informed the wider genre yet this suggests a framework adhered to closely by later films which, I feel, is not necessarily the case. I argue that the term *peplum* did not serve as a genre label, as defined by Altman, for reasons discussed below. The *peplum*’s status as a contract is also debatable, as is the concept of a fixed genre-specific viewing position, yet the relationship between genre and the spectator is worth exploring further. The *peplum* could be categorised as a genre that appeals to generic rather than cultural verisimilitude to enable spectator recognition and understanding. Dyer identifies a *peplum* formula,

¹⁰⁰ Bondanella, 2002, p.6

¹⁰¹ Dyer, 1997, p.146

¹⁰² UK title; released in the US as *Hercules and the Captive Women*.

¹⁰³ UK title; released in the US as *Hercules in the Haunted World*.

¹⁰⁴ Ciani and Bellini retained their anglicized pseudonyms for the Italian market, suggesting that local audiences preferred their *peplum* stars to be—or sound—American.

¹⁰⁵ A total of 20 Maciste films were released between 1960 and 1965, compared with 15 Hercules films.

established in *Hercules* and adhered to by subsequent films in the cycle: ‘set pieces of action and display, immediately and vividly recognisable characters and settings, and the principle of variety: feats, dances, playlets, slapstick, speeches, tableaux’.¹⁰⁶ These elements are by no means exclusive to the *peplum*,¹⁰⁷ nor are they all found in every example of the genre and I would question aspects of this formula, such as the prevalence of playlets or slapstick. However, the majority qualify as what Neale terms ‘generic dominants’ that play ‘an overall, organising role’ in the construction of the genre.¹⁰⁸ For example, the presence of a heavily muscled hero serves as a key signifier of a film’s *peplum* status, which other elements—a classical or mythical backdrop, an extraordinary feat of strength—will rapidly confirm, invoking the blueprint aspect of genre discussed by Altman.

Neale also highlights the role of specific institutional discourses, such as the film industry and the press, in the constitution of a generic corpus.¹⁰⁹ He makes a clear distinction between genres conceived as institutionalised classes of texts and systems of expectation, such as the western or musical, and genres which use critical and theoretical terms as a basis for discussing classes of film.¹¹⁰ Neale cites *film noir* as an example of the latter¹¹¹ and I argue that the *peplum* belongs in the same category. Devised by French critics, the term *peplum* was not used by film-makers, distributors, exhibitors, the popular press or audiences in identifying, defining or promoting this group of films. While the term *peplum* has inspired negligible debate compared to that surrounding the concept of *film noir*, it does not necessarily lend itself to easier definition. Neale notes that generic definitions should be placed within their historical context¹¹² and Altman concurs: ‘genres are not inert categories shared by all, but discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations’.¹¹³ In the case of the *peplum*, a group of critics active in the

¹⁰⁶ Dyer, 1997, p.166

¹⁰⁷ As Maltby notes: ‘The specificity of a genre arises not from its possessing features exclusive to it so much as from its particular combination of features, each of which it may share with other genres’ (Maltby, 1995, p.109).

¹⁰⁸ Neale, 1990, p.66

¹⁰⁹ Neale, 1990, p.66

¹¹⁰ Neale, 1990, p.52

¹¹¹ Frank Krutnik characterises *film noir* as ‘a post-constructed category...not a generic term recognised by the industry and the audiences of the 1940s’ (Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street. Film noir, genre, masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 17); Neale echoes this point (Neale, 2000, p.153).

¹¹² Neale, 1990, p.58

¹¹³ Altman, 1999, p.101

early 1960s required a term that identified and legitimised a collection of films they felt to be worthy of serious critical recognition and study. Thus while the *peplum* employed a generic verisimilitude that was recognised, understood and appreciated by spectators, the vast majority of audiences did not know these films as *pepla*. However, I would still argue that this group of mythological action films form or at least participate in a distinctive, if fluid, generic corpus.

Theorising Masculinity

Masculinity, whether in terms of ideology, gender politics or sheer spectacle, is central to discussions of the *peplum*. Any analysis of the genre needs to be placed in the context of wider debates concerning representations of masculinity in the cinema and the mass culture or cultures it reflects. Conceptions of masculinity are sometimes assumed to constitute a homogenous, universal phenomenon with no significant let alone problematic or contradictory variations. In fact, debates on what it means to be a man form a series of multifaceted national, historical, social and cultural constructs. As my case studies will demonstrate, the representation of heroic masculinity differs significantly even between films produced in similar contexts and characterised as belonging to the same genre. The *peplum* label may evoke a particular idea of masculinity, centred on the exposed body, yet counter representations can be found both within the genre and in non-*peplum* films depicting ostensibly the same setting and subject matter.

While ‘masculinity’ is by no means an academic discipline in and of itself, studies of masculinities form what social historian R.W. Connell terms ‘a comprehensible field of knowledge’.¹¹⁴ Sociologist Peter F. Murphy dates academic debates on masculinity back to the late 1970s, partly as a response to feminist theory, and drawing on fields such as

¹¹⁴ Connell, *Masculinities. Second Edition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) p.xiii

sociology, anthropology and psychology.¹¹⁵ Anthropologist David D. Gilmore notes how most societies have ideas, however vague or notional, about ‘true’ manhood and, moreover, that this quality is not the same as simple anatomical maleness but is rather a state or status achieved by boys against powerful odds.¹¹⁶ Sociologist Christopher E. Forth sees enduring western notions of an essential masculinity as a reaction against modernity, that is, ‘the more sedentary conditions of modern life that have emerged since the sixteenth century’.¹¹⁷ This masculinity may be less restrained, highly physical and even aggressive.¹¹⁸ Fellow sociologist Arthur Brittan also notes in western culture—whether art, literature or other media—a tendency to depict and celebrate masculinity in terms of the hero, hunter, competitor and conqueror.¹¹⁹ In other words, being biologically male does not automatically bestow the status of manhood and the latter quality, while found in various forms across different societies and cultures, often appeals to ideas of an essential, pre-modern masculinity that must be attained rather than granted and which emphasises action over intellect.

Connell also identifies a general assumption that ‘there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of “real men”, “natural man”’.¹²⁰ This ‘true masculinity’ is located in and inherent to the male body. Historian George L. Mosse suggests this corporeal concept or stereotype of true manliness ‘was so powerful precisely because unlike abstract ideas or ideals it could be seen, touched’.¹²¹ Western European concepts of masculine perfection can be dated back to the eighteenth century, drawing inspiration like the *peplum* from the classical world centred on Ancient Greece¹²² or rather surviving artefacts of this culture (or copies thereof) and what they were taken to represent.

¹¹⁵ Murphy (ed.), *Fictions of Masculinity. Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994) p.3. Murphy cites Paul Hoch’s *White Hero Black Beast: Racism, Sexism and the Mask of Masculinity* (London: Pluto Press, 1979) as a key pioneering text.

¹¹⁶ Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making, Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) pp.xi-xiii, 11

¹¹⁷ Forth, *Masculinity in the Modern West. Gender, Civilisation and the Body* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp.5-6

¹¹⁸ Forth, 2008, p.6

¹¹⁹ Brittan, *Masculinity and Power* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) p.77

¹²⁰ Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) p.45

¹²¹ Mosse, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p.6

¹²² Mosse, 1996, p.28. Mosse cites the pioneering and influential work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, such as *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755) and *History of Ancient Art* (1764) (Mosse, 1996, p.29).

While the body is a crucial component in constructing ideas of masculinity, the process of construction is open to question and challenge.¹²³ Far from being a fixed, gender-defined quality, ‘masculinity’ and its representation cannot be maintained, or even comprehended, in isolation from the culture that produces it. The very notion of acting like a man, in order to comply with accepted notions of masculinity, should underline its status as an *act*. This thesis is based on the assumption that the presentation or representation of masculinity always carries an element of performance or display, rather than being mere biological or genetic programming that simply ‘comes naturally’. This performance is usually in compliance with—and furtherance of—the prevailing norms determined, upheld and perpetuated by patriarchal societies. In terms of cinematic performance, Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim identify a fundamental paradox, whereby a male star representing a masculine ideal of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency cedes control of his body on two levels, ‘by passively submitting himself firstly to the grooming processes and then to the look of the camera’.¹²⁴

In the cinema, depictions of heterosexual or ‘straight’ masculinity are employed as ‘a structuring norm’ which is not intended to be questioned, let alone analysed, criticised or subverted.¹²⁵ Writing in the 1980s, Neale noted a lack of detailed study of ‘how heterosexual masculinity is inscribed and the mechanisms, pressures, and contradictions that inscription may involve’.¹²⁶ Promoting fantasies of power and omnipotence,¹²⁷ mainstream depictions of masculinity are intended to be read only in accordance with culturally ordained constructions of maleness. Yet the very act of representing masculinity in terms of the male body is inherently problematic and unstable. Neale argues, ‘the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male’.¹²⁸ The female body is presented as a legitimate object of contemplation and desire, often defining femininity solely in terms

¹²³ See for example Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002) p.203

¹²⁴ Kirkham and Thumim, *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993) p.25

¹²⁵ Neale, ‘Masculinity as spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema’, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993, pp.9-20) p.9

¹²⁶ Neale, 1993, p.9

¹²⁷ Neale, 1993, p.12

¹²⁸ Neale, 1993, p.19

of the body. The male body should not, and cannot be presented in the same way. For a man to look at an image of masculinity without disturbing the prevailing notions of maleness and male sexuality, the relationship between spectator and image must be contained and regulated. Neale suggests that ‘in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed.’¹²⁹ Cohan concurs that ‘an open acknowledgment of the male body’s erotic appeal confuses the gender orthodoxy of who looks as opposed to who is looked at’.¹³⁰ While Hollywood ‘beefcake’ stars such as Victor Mature were marketed to female viewers as objects of desire, male viewers were supposed to admire Mature’s masculine virility and physical prowess in strictly non-sexual terms, their erotic contemplation focused solely on ‘cheesecake’ starlets.

Neale has documented a classic cinematic strategy for eliminating, or at least suppressing, the ‘threat’ of inappropriately eroticised masculinity. Images of violence against the male body ‘are marks both of the repression involved and of a means by which the male body may be disqualified as an object of erotic contemplation and desire’.¹³¹ The male body subjected to violence, marked by cuts, bruises and puncture wounds, has any erotic traces literally beaten out of it. While the success of this strategy is open to debate, its repeated and indeed formulaic deployment in mainstream cinema is beyond question. Scenarios of conflict serve also to present masculinity as active, aggressive performance. The male body at rest risks being evaluated solely in terms of its physical attractiveness; the male body in action undercuts the connotations of passive display associated with femininity.¹³² The longer, fiercer and more spectacular is the combat, the greater the diversion away from unacceptable eroticism. Presenting the male body as a primary source of spectacle, both in action and at rest, the *peplum* genre highlights also the strategies, tensions and contradictions involved in this display.

¹²⁹ Neale, 1993, p.14

¹³⁰ Cohan, 1997, p.179

¹³¹ Neale, 1993, p.14

¹³² Discussing *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), Susan Jeffords argues that ‘by representing Rambo’s body as performance, the otherwise erotically suggestive display of his bare chest throughout the film is diverted as an object of military training, “a fighting machine”’ (Jeffords, *The Remasculinisation of America. Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) p.13).

Peplum masculinity

Discussing Italian cinema during the Fascist era (1922-1943) Giorgio Bertellini argues that the filmic celebration of the powerful male physique dates back to the Maciste series, centred on a giant-sized yet chivalrous strongman, produced from 1915 to 1926.¹³³

Classicist Maria Wyke's exploration of the links between body culture and the classical tradition cites *Quo Vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912) as an earlier example: 'A sense of honourable purpose was restored to the strongman [Ursus] whose body shape and associated virtuous acts were pitted against the decadence and languor of a grotesquely shapeless oppressor.'¹³⁴ Mere physical strength, however extraordinary, was insufficient. The male body had to be honed and shaped into an instrument of heroic action, further defined by its opposition to an antagonist whose physical inadequacy and unattractiveness were matched by their immoral character. This links with bodybuilding and in particular German showman Eugene Sandow, a star of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and probably the first celebrity strongman to emphasise muscular definition over sheer size or bulk.¹³⁵ The strong male body, and its classical associations, was later promoted by the Mussolini government, evoking a fascist aspect which I discuss below. As noted, the post-World War II Americanisation of Italy is also relevant to *peplum* masculinity and I address this connection in my analysis of *Hercules*. At this point I will focus on more immediate factors in 1950s Italian society at the time of the film's release.

As Liehm suggests, the overt escapism of the *peplum* genre can be seen as veiling a critique of harsh reality that links with issues relating to male physical strength.¹³⁶ From the mid-1950s onwards, there were major structural transformations in Italian society, resulting from a greater applied scientific knowledge, a market-based industrial economy

¹³³ Bertellini, 'Dubbing *L'Arte Maria*', from *Re-viewing Fascism. Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, pp.30-82) pp.34-35

¹³⁴ Wyke, 'Herculean Muscles!: The Classicizing Rhetoric of Body Building', *Constructions of the Classical Body.*, ed. James I. Porter (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp.355-379) p.361

¹³⁵ Alastair Blanshard, *Hercules. A Heroic Life* (London: Granta Books, 2005) p.153

¹³⁶ Liehm, 1984, p.183

and the rise of the urban society.¹³⁷ This led to a period of mass internal migration in Italy, from the rural south to the industrial north. There was also a shift from labour based on physical strength—previously a source of economic value—to labour based on skill with machines.¹³⁸ This change in labour requirements brought more women into the workplace, transforming their economic and social status, while men who offered only unskilled manual labour found their economic worth diminished.

This picture, though broadly accurate, requires qualification to avoid being overly schematic or simplistic. Social historians David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle argue that the popular perception of the period of economic miracle (1958-1963) tends to exaggerate the extent of the changes that took place during this time and downplays the fact that economic migration dated back to the late nineteenth century, both to other parts of Italy and abroad, especially the US.¹³⁹ Discussing Milan, a major industrial centre, fellow historians Robert Lumley and John Foot state that the influx of internal migrants during the 1950s and 1960s was largely harmonious, owing to a multi-faceted socio-economic structure and effective social organisations such as trade unions, political parties and the church.¹⁴⁰ While Milan's example may not be typical, it does suggest the immigrant experience at this time was not invariably harsh or traumatic.

The Catholic Church, which exercised considerable political and social influence within Italy, regarded gender relations in terms of what feminist historian Lesley Caldwell calls 'complementarity rather than equality'.¹⁴¹ Italian women did not have the right to vote until 1946¹⁴² and the country's Civil Code, which remained unchanged until 1975, emphasised paternal rather than parental authority.¹⁴³ In terms of gainful employment, there was a decline in the female workforce during the immediate post-war period (1945-51), when

¹³⁷ Sorlin, 1996, p.115

¹³⁸ Dyer, 1997, p.169

¹³⁹ Forgacs and Gundle, *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007) pp.4, 7

¹⁴⁰ Lumley and Foot (eds), *Italian Cityscapes. Culture and Urban Change in Contemporary Italy* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004) p.4

¹⁴¹ Caldwell, *Italian Family Matters: Women, Politics and Legal Reform* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1991) p.27

¹⁴² Daniela Treveri Gennari, *Post-War Italian Cinema. American Intervention, Vatican Interests* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009) p.118

¹⁴³ Caldwell, 1991, pp.70, 74

they represented only 25% of the workforce.¹⁴⁴ While the 1950s saw a rise in women's employment, 'they were predominantly located in low-paid jobs, often with little protection and the threat of dismissal'.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, industrialisation, urbanisation and migration were all major factors in Italian society during this period that served to question traditional gender roles and status. Fofi states that between 1958 and 1962 the tension and upheaval created by this transformation was reflected in Italian cinema, especially the feelings of discontent and isolation.¹⁴⁶ It can be argued that the *peplum*'s celebration of the strong male body offered a temporary salve to male audiences whose own physical prowess no longer had much currency in the labour market.

The heroic body

As noted, academic studies of the *peplum*'s construction of masculinity usually focus on gender, race and fascism. Dyer has argued that the 'peplum affirmed the worth of male physical strength in a rapidly industrialising society'.¹⁴⁷ Scenes where the hero fights and destroys machines—often instruments of war or torture—represent for audiences 'a fantasy of triumph over their new conditions of labour in terms of their traditional resources'.¹⁴⁸ The exposed male body, supposedly built and tanned through years of manual labour in the open air, cannot be defeated by inhuman, man-made constructions. Dyer's reading suggests such scenes are a common feature, or generic dominant, of the *peplum*, which I argue is not the case. In *Hercules*, for example, the hero battles wild animals, ape men and enemy soldiers but nothing that could be construed as a machine-like object. Moreover, a significant number of *peplum* heroes are demigods and therefore only part-human themselves. Heroes such as Hercules may serve common humanity but they stand apart from it. On a different level, the bodybuilders cast in these films were themselves 'man-made', developing their physiques with techniques that could be described as artificial. Paul Willemen offers a counterargument to Dyer, regarding the *peplum* hero as an

¹⁴⁴ Caldwell, 1991, p.111

¹⁴⁵ Caldwell, 1991, p.116

¹⁴⁶ Fofi, 1979, pp.ii-iii. My translation.

¹⁴⁷ Dyer, 1996, pp.94-95. See also Günsberg, 2005, p.97; Lagny, 1992, p.170.

¹⁴⁸ Dyer, 1997, p.169

embodiment of industrialisation rather than a reaction against it: ‘the Hercules-body is a modernised, machinic version of the equally bulky but undefined mass of the pre-modern wrestler or fairground strongman.’¹⁴⁹ Willemen appears to suppose that *peplum* bodies are indistinguishable and interchangeable, underlining their ‘machinic’ construction, yet while bodybuilder stars may have aspired to common ideals of physical perfection, no two bodies could be identical. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the *peplum* bodies are, to whatever degree, industrial products that deny or ignore the circumstances of their production in order to appeal to preindustrial attitudes towards male physical strength and its associated value(s).

Dyer also notes that the naked or partially clothed body is vulnerable, in both physical and social senses.¹⁵⁰ Clothing or costume can offer protection and signify status, whether social, economic or political. The *pepla* erase—or at least disguise—this vulnerability, representing the built male body as an incontestable source of strength. In *La battaglia di Maratona (The Giant of Marathon)*, Jacques Tourneur and Bruno Vailati, 1959), Phillipides (Steve Reeves), clad only in a loincloth, defeats his heavily armoured opponent, despite the weaponry, troops and technology at the latter’s disposal.¹⁵¹ Characterising the naked body in terms of vulnerability is however open to debate, especially in relation to representations of the classical world. Classicist and art historian Robin Osborne suggests that in Greek art the exposure of male flesh can also be read as an act of heroisation or idealisation.¹⁵² In some traditions, gender difference—and the associated masculine power and potency—requires the exposure of the body. Osborne cites eighth century BC Geometric art, where ‘to be a man is to be unclothed’.¹⁵³ Being nude, rather than naked, can be viewed as an empowering costume.

¹⁴⁹ Willemen, ‘Fantasy in Action’, from *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman (New York & Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010, pp.247-286) p.275

¹⁵⁰ Dyer, 1997, p.146

¹⁵¹ Dyer, 1997, p.164

¹⁵² Osborne, ‘Men Without Clothes: Heroic Nakedness and Greek Art’, from *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Maria Wyke (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pp.80-104) p.81

¹⁵³ Osborne, 1998, p.83

The fascist body

Just as the *peplum*'s promotion of 'natural' masculine strength that transcends the vulnerability inherent to the exposed body is open to question, so the genre's link to fascism is more complex and problematic than previous studies would suggest. Noting Italy's historical association with fascism, Dyer states: 'The appeal of this body type, especially with renewed force in a period of class upheaval, remains throughout the *peplum* in tension with the memory of its exaltation in the disgraceful recent past.'¹⁵⁴ While this tension identified by Dyer is undeniably a factor in the genre's representation of heroic masculinity, I argue its significance has been overstated or at least not sufficiently addressed. I engage with debates relating to fascism and the *peplum* in my discussion of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. At this point I will note that the term 'fascism' requires greater definition and contextualisation than Dyer provides.¹⁵⁵ While Italian Fascism valorised the strong male body as an instrument of discipline and authority, not to mention a symbol of the revitalised post-World War I Italian character, the Mussolini regime displayed little interest in the cinema as a medium for direct propaganda.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, Fascism's promotion of sport, arguably its major contribution to the national popular culture,¹⁵⁷ invoked Greco-Roman mythology, and the Mussolini stadium, Foro di Mussolini, featured classical statues, including the figure of Hercules. Dalle Vacche notes how these images associated with Roman mythology and, by extension, the Roman Empire were part of a wider scheme to link the new Fascist order with a militaristic and imperialistic past promoted as the historical and cultural heritage common to all Italian people.¹⁵⁸ I would argue however that the appropriation of classical iconography by Mussolini's government does not necessarily mean that all subsequent Italian-produced representations of Greco-Roman mythical heroes—cinematic or otherwise—were tinged

¹⁵⁴ Dyer, 1997, p.176. See also Dalle Vacche, 1992, p.53

¹⁵⁵ As political historian Robert O. Paxton notes, the term fascist can denote a populist party of militant nationalists, in collaboration with entrenched conservative elites, which pursues through often violent means goals of 'internal cleansing and external expansion', disregarding democratic liberties and ethical or legal restraints (Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin Books, 2005) p.15). Edward R. Tannenbaum characterises Italian Fascism as 'the post-war [World War I] political expression of anti-intellectual mass movements that began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century' (Tannenbaum, *Fascism in Italy. Society and Culture 1922-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1973) p.12). In terms of political agendas, Paxton sees Italian Fascism as a nationalist movement against socialism, couched in terms of conflict, in line with his more general definition of fascism (Paxton, 2005, p.5).

¹⁵⁶ See Tannenbaum, 1973) pp.269-270, 280, and Bondanella, 2002, p.13

¹⁵⁷ See Forgacs and Gundle, 2007, p.240

¹⁵⁸ Dalle Vacche, 1992, p.24

by association with the Fascist regime, especially in terms of their international reception.¹⁵⁹

The colonial body

The *peplum*'s promotion of heroic masculinity as an intrinsically white quality links with what Dyer terms 'colonial adventures',¹⁶⁰ where the *peplum* hero, invariably a male Caucasian, arrives in a foreign land where he delivers the helpless natives from the forces of oppression. While the genre's overt message may seem positive and progressive—the overthrow of totalitarian regimes and the (re)establishment of benign government—the *peplum* is based on racial and ethnic difference and disunity which invariably favours the male Caucasian.¹⁶¹ Sociologist Ellis Cashmore characterises the colonial mentality as 'a mode of thinking which follows the attempts of colonial Europeans to explain and justify their supposed superiority over groups falling under their domination'.¹⁶² Jonathan Rutherford likewise notes how this attitude 'produced a meaning of blackness, of an Other, that constructs a sense of white supremacy'.¹⁶³ Oppressive or benevolent, this domination would not be desirable, sustainable or even feasible if the white Europeans were not naturally superior to the subjugated natives.

Dyer argues that 'Hercules and the rest show us ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned white male bodies set in a colonialist relation, of aid as much as antagonism, to lands and peoples that are other to them.'¹⁶⁴ I agree that the concept of difference is central

¹⁵⁹ Even at the time, Mussolini's carefully-honed Herculean image was not always successful outside Italy. Classicist Alastair Blanshard notes how he 'was ridiculed by other European leaders for looking like a "side-show strongman" in his propaganda', reducing the heroic male body to a cheap fairground attraction devoid of classical resonance (Blanshard, 2005, p.xvii).

¹⁶⁰ Dyer, 1997, p.147

¹⁶¹ Günsberg echoes Dyer's observations on this construction of racial difference, noting the presence of 'non-white, non-western masculinity coded as inferior' (Günsberg, 2005, p.118).

¹⁶² Cashmore, *The Logic of Racism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987) p.8

¹⁶³ Rutherford, 'Who's That Man?', *Male Order. Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996, pp.21-67) p.60

¹⁶⁴ Dyer, 1997, p.161

to the *peplum* genre's representations of masculinity. On the most obvious levels, the hero is bigger and stronger than his allies and most of his opponents, as were heroes in classical art. I do not feel, however, that this difference can be characterised or contained by such categories as race or ethnicity. Dyer's prime example is *Il figlio di Spartacus* (*The Son of Spartacus*, Sergio Corbucci, 1962), where the oppressed North Africans can be saved only by Randus (Steve Reeves), a Roman centurion, and his blond German sidekick.¹⁶⁵ I argue that this preoccupation with 'enlightened colonialism'¹⁶⁶ is not typical of Reeves' *peplum* films or the genre as a whole. The hero's actions do not evoke the elements of occupation, control and exploitation suggested by the term colonialism. The superior heroic masculinity on display is differentiated from *all* other forms of masculinity, regardless of class, status, race or ethnicity. It is just as legitimate to argue that 'ordinary' masculinity is presented as a structuring norm in relation to the images of super-masculinity around which the *peplum* films are based.

Femininity

The *peplum*'s affirmation of white male strength is also linked to a conservative patriarchal view of gender relations. Günsberg states that patriarchy ideologises gender as 'a biologically determined inner essence shaping a stable, unified identity'.¹⁶⁷ Based on biological programming that precedes and transcends social and cultural factors, gender identity is thus fixed and indisputable. This ideology is reflected in the *peplum*, where masculine strength, potency and power are set in opposition to feminine vulnerability, dependency and powerlessness. (In *Hercules*, the hero's first act is to rescue Princess Iole when the horses pulling her chariot run out of control.) This approach seems to me reductive when applied to the *peplum*, as several of my case studies will demonstrate. Even in the case of *Hercules*, the apparently straightforward depiction of gender difference is revealed as highly problematic. Günsberg argues further that 'the main agenda of these films is to reaffirm patriarchy's baseline of homosocial relations...in the face of fear of a

¹⁶⁵ Dyer, 1997, p.176

¹⁶⁶ Dyer, 1997, p.176

¹⁶⁷ Günsberg, 2005, pp.1-2

gynosocial alternative.’¹⁶⁸ (The all-female Amazon society in *Hercules* is explicitly depicted as unnatural and dangerous, threatening the all-male Argonaut crew with treachery, betrayal and murder under the guise of seduction.) Gynosociality is associated with what Günsberg terms illicit heterosexual activity, recreational and extra-domestic, as opposed to the licit form, which is procreational and domestic.¹⁶⁹ Challenging homosociality, gynosociality enables an empowered, sexual femininity unacceptable to patriarchy, which requires a non-threatening asexual femininity contained within the domestic sphere.¹⁷⁰ I argue that this is a limited reading of the genre, not least because the homosocial relations depicted in these films can exhibit little unity or harmony. All-male groupings are shown to be unstable and unsustainable, held together only by the leadership and superhuman strength of the hero.

From *Hercules* onwards, the *peplum*’s construction of heroic masculinity is riven with contradictions and ambiguities on multiple levels. For example, it can be argued that the idealised masculinity constructed by the *peplum* is shown to be beyond the reach of ordinary men and therefore serves ultimately to underline their powerlessness, whether in purely physical terms or on a social, economic or political level. Dyer touches on this issue, acknowledging that ‘the oddness of the cycle is that it simultaneously offers figures with whom the imputed audience may identify—the validated strong male body—and takes this away by placing them above the common man’.¹⁷¹ As with the silent-era Maciste, Hercules and his successors may serve as inspirational figures but cannot function so readily as practical role models. Cohan notes how the casting of bodybuilders undercuts the presentation of masculinity as a natural, fixed and unchanging essence: ‘Strictly speaking, bulging, well-articulated muscles are not a natural condition of bodies but the result of repeated labour and discipline and, in a lot of cases, a careful regimen of diet and steroids.’¹⁷² Günsberg concurs that the male bodies on display in the *peplum* films are marked by ‘their sheer excess, artificiality and unnaturalness’.¹⁷³ If the *peplum* body is

¹⁶⁸ Günsberg, 2005, p.130

¹⁶⁹ Günsberg, 2005, p.107

¹⁷⁰ Günsberg, 2005, pp.120, 122

¹⁷¹ Dyer, 1997, p.180

¹⁷² Cohan, 1997, p.185

¹⁷³ Günsberg, 2005, p.183

excessive and unnatural and these qualities cannot be legitimised, contained or at least disguised, the hero becomes a problematic and potentially threatening figure rather than the ultimate manifestation of masculine potency.

By tracing the development of the *peplum* through an analysis of selected titles, I will show that this genre has never offered a straightforward, unambiguous endorsement of either male physical strength or a reactionary, patriarchal status quo. The heroic masculinity of the *peplum* hero can signify his status as marginalised ‘other’ rather than man of the people. The qualities that make him exceptional may not ultimately be reconciled with the cultural, social, hierarchical, and gender orthodoxies constructed by the films’ narratives. In the case of *Hercules*, this rupture of ‘perfect’ masculinity appears to be unintentional, the closing scene endorsing a benevolent patriarchal order previously shown as unsustainable. Later *peplum* or *peplum*-inspired films are more conscious attempts to satirise or challenge the genre and therefore the prescribed notions of masculinity. The post-*peplum* films evoke the genre in their emphasis on the displayed muscular male body in a mythical or classical setting yet their representations of this body depart significantly from the *peplum* ‘blueprint’ established in *Hercules*.

Methodology

One of my key methodological tools will be textual analysis, that is, a detailed examination of a given film for layers or facets of meaning requiring systematic interpretation above and beyond its status as a coherent cinematic narrative. This approach is characterised by Robert Stam as addressing a film’s status as an artefact—planned and constructed with a degree of thought and intention—and therefore a productive means of interrogating its ‘unspoken premises’,¹⁷⁴ not least those elements which appear to endorse, contest or subvert prevailing notions of film form or, in a wider context, dominant ideologies. Richard Neupert also notes the enriching possibilities of a ‘purposeful analysis [and] a

¹⁷⁴ Stam, *Film Theory. An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000) p.185-186

rigour of interpretation' that while by no means objective goes beyond mere subjective response by placing a given film within wider frameworks both filmic and extra-filmic.¹⁷⁵ A film text consists of 'multiple signifying or discursive structures' and textual analysis is 'the activity of testing a film or group of films for specific, pertinent language-system codes', some specific to the cinema (shot/reverse shot), some shared with other visual media (forms of lighting).¹⁷⁶ For example, the depiction of a given character within a particular scene in terms of framing, composition, shot-type, editing, lighting, costume or make-up may be of greater significance than their dialogue or ostensible narrative function. In a classical Hollywood western, a figure dressed in white will be identified readily as the hero/heroine before he/she has performed any heroic actions because in western cultures whiteness is associated predominantly with valour, virtue and purity. It has been argued that scholars and critics employ textual analysis with the aim of persuading readers that their interpretation of a film is definitive and will be recognised as such by a perceptive readership.¹⁷⁷ Whatever the agenda informing a given film reading, which is by no means always explicit, I do not agree that textual analysis is routinely deployed, presented or received in such absolute terms but rather as just one perspective among many possible alternatives.

Textual analysis has not been employed widely in relation to debates on the *peplum* genre, with the partial exception of commentary centred specifically on *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*.¹⁷⁸ The lack of in-depth examination is a limitation, which can give rise to generalisations about the genre that do not fit the individual films. For example, Dyer's discussion of *Son of Spartacus* in terms of colonial masculinity does not emphasise sufficiently that in this instance heroic masculinity alone is not enough to overcome the forces of oppression. While previous studies of the *peplum* have attached negligible importance to the individual films, I argue an appreciation of the genre's significance can

¹⁷⁵ Neupert, 'Looking at Film', *The Cinema Book. Third Edition*, ed. Pam Cook (London: BFI, 2007, pp.532-535) p.532

¹⁷⁶ Neupert, 2007, p.534

¹⁷⁷ See, for example, James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper (eds), *The New Film History. Sources, Methods, Approaches* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.181

¹⁷⁸ See for example Tom Milne, 'Hercules Conquers Atlantis', *Monthly Film Bulletin* January 1986, Vol. 53, No. 624, p.19; Pomeroy, 2008, pp.50-54; Kim Shahabudin, 'Ancient Mythology and Modern Myths: *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961)', *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*, ed. Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp.196-216); Burke, 2011, pp.38-47. Elsewhere, Lagny provides a textual analysis of *The Giant of Marathon* (Lagny, 1992, pp.164-165), while Burke also addresses *The Colossus of Rhodes* (Burke, 2011, pp.33-38).

be attained only through a detailed analysis of selected texts on multiple levels, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which a given film may relate to and resonate with extra-textual factors. Stam states that treating films as texts means they merit the same level of serious study given to literature which in turn links to notions of authorship or rather *auteurism*, ‘a logical corollary’.¹⁷⁹ While I share Stam’s view of the significance of film texts, this association seems overly simplistic and I question whether a film, *peplum* or otherwise, need have a single, readily identifiable author.

I have chosen six key titles for analysis, a selection that raises potential problems of its own. For example, while the inclusion of *Hercules*, the first in the cycle, would generally be regarded as a logical step, it could be argued that the film is heavily indebted to, say, *Cabiria* or *Ulisse (Ulysses)*, Mario Camerini, 1954), starring Kirk Douglas as the mythical hero, and cannot be comprehended in isolation from them. I would not claim the films under discussion comprise an authoritative ‘canon’ of *peplum* works that exhibit every facet of the genre, any more than my analysis of them offers a definitive, incontestable reading of the genre. At the same time, I believe my choice of titles enables me to explore the development of the *peplum* in relation to representations of masculinity with an approach that offers an interesting perspective on the genre. While the constraints and limitations of this approach should be acknowledged, they do not invalidate it as a methodological tool.

At first glance, some of my choices may seem curious. Only three of the films under analysis can be characterised as *pepla* in a strict sense of the term, as defined above. These titles are *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. A fourth, the American-financed *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963) is linked to the Italian-produced films on various levels: chronological, thematic, industrial and economic. It was filmed in Italy in 1961, the height of the *peplum* cycle and the year of release in Italy for *Duel of the Titans* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. Two of my chosen films were made many years after the *peplum* cycle came to its generally recognised end in the mid-1960s. *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982) was produced in the context of the post-*Star*

¹⁷⁹ Stam, 2000, pp.185-186

Wars (George Lucas, 1977) boom in fantasy films and offers an interesting variant on the *peplum* hero as a sword-and-sorcery protagonist. Neale suggests the latter cycle marked a revival of the *peplum* under another guise,¹⁸⁰ and could thus be characterised as a continuation of the genre. I argue that the film is a post-*peplum* neo-mythical fantasy that consciously draws on, develops and reworks key aspects of the *peplum*, not least the centrality of the exposed muscular male body and its identification, however contentious, as the ultimate manifestation of male strength and potency. Similar criteria apply to *300*, where the Spartans at Thermopylae are represented as the descendents of Hercules, the performers' CGI-enhanced torsos marking a manifestation of heroic masculinity which reflects recent developments in cinema technology while being heavily indebted to the 1958 *Hercules* model. Both *Conan the Barbarian* and *300* evince the continuing influence of the *peplum* while broadening and deepening my analysis of the latter's evolving constructions of masculinity. For example, issues of racial difference and antagonism linked to the *peplum* are developed and highlighted in *Conan the Barbarian* and, especially *300*, which pits white Spartan against non-white Persian. In the former instance, the construction of racial disharmony is more complicated than Dyer's colonial pattern would suggest, while *300* depicts the Persians as the aggressive, malevolent would-be colonialists, driven back by Spartan heroism and sacrifice. Furthermore, *300* foregrounds a collective yet elitist form of heroic masculinity, the Spartan heroes evoking and celebrating a fascist ideology more pronounced than any found in the *peplum* genre itself. In line with the concept of genre evolution, my approach is chronological, with one exception. The chapter covering *Jason and the Argonauts*, released in 1963, is placed before my analysis of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, released in Italy in 1961. The latter displays a revisionist approach to the *peplum*, distinguishing it from the earlier films that inspired the American production. The production and release dates of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* also rule out the likelihood of it influencing *Jason and the Argonauts* as the former was released in the UK in 1962 and the US in 1963.

¹⁸⁰ Neale, 2000, p.92. Kevin M. Flanagan argues similarly that sword-and-sorcery films are 'period-sensitive revitalizations of the seemingly moribund sword and sandal moment [sic]' (Flanagan, 'Civilization...ancient and wicked', *Of Muscles and Men. Essays on the Sword & Sandal Film*, ed. Michael G. Cornelius (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2011, pp.87-103) p.89).

As Stam notes, textual analysis may be criticised as overly reductive if it is ahistorical and therefore does not take context, production and reception into account.¹⁸¹ For this reason my methodological approach also draws on reception studies, which, as Barbara Klinger states, ‘examine a network of relationships between a film or filmic element (such as a star), adjacent inter-textual fields such as censorship, exhibition practices, star publicity and reviews, and the dominant or alternative ideologies of society at a particular time’.¹⁸² For the purposes of this thesis, I am particularly interested in the promotion and critical reception of the *peplum* genre in various countries, with the emphasis on Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States. I will reference magazine articles; reviews, mainstream and specialist; promotional artwork, and press books, which provided production credits, plot synopses, advertising copy and suggestions for further promotion. Discussing classical Hollywood cinema, Miriam Hansen argues its global success lay partly in the way ‘it meant different things to different people and publics, both at home and abroad...consumed in locally quite specific, and unequally developed, contexts and conditions of *reception*’.¹⁸³ The meaning or significance of a film could not be regarded as fixed or stable once it entered into public circulation, national or international, as its reception in a given market, national or regional, was dependent on an ever-changing multiplicity of interrelated factors. As Hansen states, the reception of films was also affected ‘by censorship, marketing, and programming practices in the countries in which they were distributed, not to mention practices of dubbing and subtitling.’¹⁸⁴ This aspect has particular relevance to the *pepla*, which were distributed in various languages outside Italy and routinely retitled and edited for timing and content, particularly in the US and UK. For example, while *Duel of the Titans* was released as ‘Romulus and Remus’ in Italy, Spain, France and West Germany, the film’s English title played down its origins in Roman mythology, emphasising instead the violent spectacle and larger-than-life main characters.

As with textual analysis, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and constraints of this approach. Willems cautions that referring a film to a given historical moment risks overlooking how the latter ‘is itself an intricate patchwork of interest-positions...often

¹⁸¹ Stam, 2000, p.193

¹⁸² Klinger, ‘Film history terminable and interminable: recovering the past in reception studies’, *Screen*, Volume 30, Issue 2, Summer 1997, pp.107-128, p.108

¹⁸³ Hansen, ‘The mass production of the senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism’, *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000, pp.332-350) p.341

¹⁸⁴ Hansen, 2000, p. 341

formed in pre-modern or even older socio-cultural constellations.¹⁸⁵ As my case studies demonstrate, extra-filmic contexts involve a multiplicity of historical, social, economic and cultural factors with roots dating back decades if not centuries in some instances. More specifically, Klinger argues that ‘studying a film’s connection to a single external field, such as reviews, is obviously not enough to portray exhaustively the elements involved in a film’s social circulation’.¹⁸⁶ The critical response to a film, favourable or otherwise, reveals only a small part of this ‘social circulation’ and the material it provides cannot be extrapolated into a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. What such a study can do, as Klinger states, is ‘tell us how that field produced meaning for the film and give us a partial view of its discursive surround’.¹⁸⁷

Reviews, whether in the popular press or specialist film magazines, are potentially problematic in and of themselves. As Janet Staiger observes, a review is produced and published within certain constraints and limitations: ‘It certainly is no direct display of the reviewer’s “response” to the film; it capitulates to norms of its genre; its function warps its material.’¹⁸⁸ Issues of word limits, in-house style and target readership all play a part in shaping the published review, both in form and content. Donald Crafton cautions against critics’ reviews being taken unconditionally as representative of other viewers lest ‘the interpretations of a few become the index of the film’s general reception.’¹⁸⁹ While this is a valid point I would question there being any widespread assumption that a given reviewer necessarily and consistently speaks for their regular or occasional readership, let alone the wider cinema-going public. Allowing for these constraints, a review can be placed in comparative relation with other reviews generated from analogous circumstances. In this way, similarities and differences, as Staiger states, ‘begin to be observable and potentially

¹⁸⁵ Willemsen, 2010, p.250

¹⁸⁶ Klinger, 1997, p.110

¹⁸⁷ Klinger, 1997, p.110. For example, the British reviews for *Hercules in the Centre of the Earth* include a comment from the *Monthly Film Bulletin*: ‘This may well be the first mythical-horror-spectacle.’ Writing in 1962, the anonymous critic recognised and acknowledged the film’s innovative use of trans-generic strategies (Anonymous. *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Volume XXX, Nos 348-359 (London: British Film Institute, 1963) p.21).

¹⁸⁸ Staiger, ‘Reception Studies: The Death of the Reader’, *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: AMS Press, 1989, pp.353-367) p.362

¹⁸⁹ Crafton, ‘*The Jazz Singer*’s Reception in the Media and at the Box Office’, *Post-Theory. Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, pp.460-480) p.460

pertinent'.¹⁹⁰ While I make reference to reviews of *peplum* films, it should be noted that much film journalism and criticism of the era, mainstream and specialist, paid only limited attention to the genre, in ways that contribute minimally to my argument.¹⁹¹ Articles on the *peplum* from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Cinema 64* and *Films and Filming* have been cited, along with more passing comments that offer nevertheless an interesting perspective on the genre's contemporary reception.

I will employ textual analysis and reception studies in conjunction with an exploration of socio-political-cultural links centred on constructions of masculinity and related fields. In addition to the works already cited, primary sources that have informed this approach include social historian K.A. Cuordileone, whose discussion of Cold War-era America in the 1950s and early 1960s argues how concerns over a 'soft', domesticated masculinity were countered with a 'hard' New Frontier masculinity. This approach has contributed to my analysis of *Jason and the Argonauts*, not least in the invocation of classically-derived ideals of manliness and, especially, the emphasis on rejuvenated leadership.¹⁹² My discussion of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* draws on historians R.J.B. Bosworth and Paul Ginsborg, whose accounts of post-World War II Italian politics illuminate how events during the early 1960s, at the height of the *peplum* cycle, challenged the prolonged collective silence within Italy over the country's recent fascist past, a development not addressed in previous scholarship on either this particular film or the *peplum* genre as a whole.¹⁹³ My analysis of *Conan the Barbarian* in terms of racial difference is informed by Susan Jeffords' work on 1980s body-centred individualism associated with US cultural icons Ronald Reagan and John Rambo and its implicit opposition of the white and non-white body, in conjunction with social historian Steven Shull's exploration of civil rights issues and passive racism in Reagan-era America.¹⁹⁴ I also invoke Dyer's analysis of

¹⁹⁰ Staiger, 1989, p.362

¹⁹¹ For example, the leading British film journal *Sight and Sound* featured almost no coverage of the *peplum*, other than fleeting references in an article by Peter John Dyer, entitled 'Z Films' (*Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1964, Vol.33, No.4, pp.179-181).

¹⁹² Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁹³ Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London and New York: Arnold-Oxford University Press, 1998); Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943-1988* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1990).

¹⁹⁴ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Shull, *A Kinder, Gentler Racism? The Reagan-Bush Civil Rights Legacy* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

stereotypes of non-whiteness, or blackness, in my discussions of *Conan the Barbarian* and *300*, which argues that qualities perceived as positive in a white body become problematic when linked to the non-white body.¹⁹⁵

Structure

This thesis consists of six chapters, examining six key films. Chapter Two is focused on *Hercules*, the film credited with establishing the basic tenets of the *peplum*. To contextualise the film's construction of the Herculean physique, I discuss earlier, non-cinematic representations of Hercules and the origins and antecedents of the *peplum* genre. I locate *Hercules* in the ongoing process of Americanisation prevalent in Italy during the 1950s, originating in Cold War political manoeuvring, and explore the film's link to the US-centred bodybuilding culture above and beyond the casting of Steve Reeves. I will argue against *Hercules* being characterised as an unconditional endorsement of male strength and individualism, the title figure serving as a bold 'Cold Warrior' who offered reassurance during an era of marked political and social unrest. This chapter also examines a counter-discourse of heroic masculinity in *Duel of the Titans*, which places Reeves' Romulus in alliance, then opposition, with his twin brother Remus, played by new *peplum* star Gordon Scott. While I do not argue *Duel of the Titans* marked a radical shift in the *peplum* genre, it does demonstrate that *peplum* masculinity exhibits more facets than the *Hercules* model.

Chapter Three examines the American response to the *peplum* genre in terms of emulation and differentiation. I focus on the US-financed film *Jason and the Argonauts*, which restages the quest for the Golden Fleece, also featured in the second half of *Hercules*, structuring the narrative around the eponymous hero. *Jason and the Argonauts* features, I argue, a conscious and acknowledged reaction to the depiction of Herculean masculinity in

¹⁹⁵ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London and Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1986) and *White* (1997).

the earlier film. Hercules is represented in reduced form, in terms of physical presence, screen time, dramatic function and male potency. Focusing on this last aspect, I explore the significance of the film's alternative representation of Hercules.

Chapter Four looks at an Italian-produced counter representation of Herculean masculinity in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. The film presents, on the surface, a humorous inversion of the character as played by Steve Reeves, and depicts its hero as a domesticated, paternal establishment figure seemingly at odds with the *peplum*'s emphasis on the non-domestic homosocial quest. As noted, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is one of the relatively few *peplum* films to merit consideration and appreciation by contemporary critics and scholars. While I am not concerned with the *auteurist* commentary on director Vittorio Cottafavi, I will engage with other aspects of these debates relevant to my main argument.

Chapter Five examines the influence of the *peplum* on subsequent action-fantasy cycles. I focus on *Conan the Barbarian*, and the ways in which it evokes and remodels aspects of the earlier genre, not least the tensions and contradictions located in gender and racial difference. Arnold Schwarzenegger, cast in the title role, followed Steve Reeves as a champion bodybuilder who became a film star and while *Conan the Barbarian* forsakes the Greco-Roman classicism that informs much of the *peplum* genre for the pulp fiction of Robert E. Howard, it draws on the iconography and aesthetics of the *peplum*. Schwarzenegger's Conan has been characterized as a 'classic' *peplum* hero in the Reeves/Hercules mould yet there are significant differences in his representation alongside the clear similarities.

Chapter Six studies the millennial epic revival, focusing on *300*. The commercial success of *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) was heralded as marking the return of the Hollywood epic, yet elements of the film—notably the fighting male body as an object of display—arguably owe as much to the *peplum* as to big-budget representations of the ancient world. The reception of *300* referenced bodybuilding, the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery films, aligning it with a tradition of representing heroic masculinity traceable through *Conan the Barbarian* back to *Hercules*. While my earlier case studies inform my argument against the

peplum being perceived as an unqualified endorsement of white male strength, superiority and supremacy, *300* stands as a markedly more reactionary depiction of heroic masculinity.

In 2007, feminist writer Lynne Segal, noting the progress of what she termed Men's Studies, saw little resolution or even consensus in the various arguments: 'after so much ink has been spilt on men and masculinities, the questions in the popular domain have only intensified'.¹⁹⁶ With debates on masculinity still current within academic discourses it is pertinent to continue the exploration of what film studies can bring to this expanding field. Discussing the Hollywood detective film, Philippa Gates argues that, given popular cinema's preoccupation with constructing ideal images of femininity and masculinity, film studies offers 'a logical perspective from which to address the question of masculinity in the contemporary era'.¹⁹⁷ While I question the extent to which cinematic representations of femininity and masculinity are constructed and intended as ideal—a subjective term in itself—I concur that issues of masculinity as refracted through the cinema have much to contribute to current debates. This thesis reaffirms the value, cultural and otherwise, of popular genre cinema above and beyond the well-established fields of classical and post-classical Hollywood. Hercules, standard-bearer of the *peplum*, stands alongside James Bond and Tarzan in the 'spectrum of heroic male types' identified by Forth.¹⁹⁸ The cinematic depictions of Hercules and other heroes have a cultural resonance and significance comparable to that of Bond and Tarzan, the tensions, contradictions, variations and transformations of the wider culture written on their heroic bodies.

¹⁹⁶ Segal, *Slow Motion. Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* Third, revised edition (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.xvii

¹⁹⁷ Gates, *Detecting Men. Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006) p.6

¹⁹⁸ Forth, 2008, p.219

Chapter Two

Fragmented Masculinity: Deconstruction and Reconstruction in *Hercules* and *Duel of the Titans*

In Chapter One, I stated that the *peplum* foregrounds the muscular male body as an instrument of self-reliance, liberation and moral authority. This is not in itself a controversial or widely contested reading of the genre. What concerns me is the fragility of this representation of masculinity and its tendency to rupture under analysis. A number of commentators, notably Richard Dyer and Maggie Günsberg,¹⁹⁹ cite the *peplum* as an affirmation and valorisation of male strength within a patriarchal context, linked to wider debates on Italian and a more universal ‘Americanised’ masculinity during the 1950s and early 1960s. While agreeing that contextualisation is important to any appreciation of the *peplum*, I find their conclusions problematic. In this chapter, I develop my argument that the genre’s representation of masculinity has never offered a straightforward, unambiguous endorsement of either male physical strength or a reactionary, patriarchal status quo.

My starting point is the construction of masculinity in *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958), the film commonly credited with launching the *peplum* genre. I will outline some of the contexts— industrial, economic, cultural—in which the film was produced and explore the various forms of masculinity—cinematic and extra-cinematic—from which it derived the super-masculinity embodied by the title character. The international success of *Hercules* suggests its representation of masculinity had a wide appeal that extended far beyond Italy. The figure of Hercules, played by American bodybuilder Steve Reeves, possessed a significance and value—economic and otherwise—that transcended national and cultural boundaries. I explore various explanations proffered for this success in terms of the film’s reception, both synchronic and diachronic. I then outline some of the debates raised by

¹⁹⁹ Dyer, *The Companion to Italian Cinema*, eds Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, James Hay and Gianni Volpi (London: British Film Institute, 1996) pp.94-95; Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.97.

Hercules' representation of masculinity and the problems I see embodied therein. A number of these issues relate to more general discussions of masculinity in the cinema and I will engage with the work of Neale, Cohan and others. I am especially interested in the following aspects: the latent eroticism of the displayed male body and the repression and displacement of this eroticism; the legitimisation of the displayed male body through spectacular action, often but not invariably of a violent nature; the contrast of this masculinity with constructions of femininity that are themselves problematic and prone to disintegration; Hercules as a figurehead for homosociality, or the relations between men.

I will argue that *Hercules* depicts the super-human body of the title character as the focus for a series of intersecting, contradictory and irresolvable debates on male potency, homoeroticism, gender difference and perfection as threat. The apparent endorsement of a reactionary, patriarchal status quo is subverted on multiple levels and the hero's status as marginalised 'other' cannot ultimately be reconciled with the social, hierarchical and gender orthodoxies constructed by the narrative. If *Hercules* established the ground rules for the *peplum* genre, it also generated a template of masculinity, or super-masculinity, that serves as a simultaneous act of deconstruction.

Many subsequent *pepla* emulate *Hercules*' representation of masculinity with no significant variation. *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961) is a notable exception. I will suggest that *Duel of the Titans* is unusual for the *peplum* genre in offering a potential resolution of debates raised in *Hercules* on issues of male potency, gender difference and perfection as threat. This is achieved, in part at least, through splitting the muscle-bound hero into two characters, the twin brothers Romulus (Steve Reeves) and Remus (Gordon Scott), figures from Roman mythology. As with *Hercules*, I will place my discussion of the film in its production context, emphasising the casting of Scott, another American bodybuilder and a former screen incarnation of Tarzan. I argue that *Duel of the Titans* constructs a sustainable masculinity, marked by qualification and restriction which plays upon ideas of male vulnerability. This is also an evolving masculinity, compatible with and nurtured by the film's construction of femininity. I will argue further in my conclusion that the contained masculinity in *Duel of the Titans*, though viable on its own terms, had

negligible impact on the *peplum* genre as a whole and explore some of the reasons why this is the case.

Hercules Re-Made

It should be noted that the Hercules embodied by Steve Reeves forms part of a long and varied history of representation. Jaimee Pugliese Uhlenbrock suggests artistic depictions of Hercules, or Herakles,²⁰⁰ may date back to the eighth century BC²⁰¹ and the demigod has been characterised variously as both a tragic and comic figure, a lecher, a glutton, a romantic, a symbol of virtue, an intellectual and an embodiment of extraordinary physical strength.²⁰² For example, as G. Karl Galinsky notes, Hercules is cited as a tragic hero in Chaucer's 'The Monk's Tale', from *The Canterbury Tales* (late 14th century), 'a worthy, mighty man being overthrown by the caprice of Fortune.'²⁰³ Galinsky suggests Hercules' evolving characterisation in Greek mythology and culture reflects the history of the country:

His beginnings, like those of primitive Greece, were violent...[then] Herakles came to personify the rudimentary civilising efforts--he drains swamps, builds cities, and destroys wild beasts and tyrants...Herakles then became the supreme symbol of Greek individualism and humanism...The sophists and philosophers finally accentuated his mental powers. Every age in Greece recast Herakles in its own image, and he thus became the incarnation of her history and aspirations.²⁰⁴

While this parallel may be criticised as simplistic, the progression through primitivism, civilisation and humanism to intellectualism is evidenced in key myths, dramatic works and philosophical debates.

²⁰⁰ The standard English-language rendition of his Greek name

²⁰¹ Uhlenbrock, *Herakles: Passage of the Hero Through 1000 Years of Classical Art* (New Rochelle, New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1986) p.7

²⁰² Uhlenbrock, 1986, p.19

²⁰³ Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme. The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972) p.200

²⁰⁴ Galinsky, pp.148-149

Early depictions of Hercules emphasised his sheer size and power. Alastair Blanshard argues that in Ancient Greece ‘people believed that size and heroism went together’.²⁰⁵ To be large was to be heroic, regardless of personal morality or conduct. As Galinsky notes, ‘physical strength is ambivalent. It can be used for a bad purpose.’²⁰⁶ Uhlenbrock concurs that many early depictions of Hercules highlight an ‘expansive and rather defiant character and his propensity for fits of rage and almost unbridled violence.’²⁰⁷ Over time, representations of Hercules reflected ‘the transformation of the morally objectionable strong-man into an ethical ideal’ and in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Unbound* (c480-410BC) he ‘had changed from the arbitrary perpetrator of excessive force to an ideally motivated and awesome advocate of justice’.²⁰⁸ The late 5th century BC saw the rise of an intellectualised Hercules,²⁰⁹ exemplified in Prodicus’ ‘The Choice of Herakles’ where the demigod opts for a life of toil and duty over ease and pleasure. Galinsky notes: ‘The process of choosing... was an intellectual effort and intelligence thus became one of the hero’s attributes.’²¹⁰ Blanshard offers an alternative reading of this fable that reflects less favourably on Hercules: ‘The pursuit of undying glory, rather than any abstract notion of goodness, is what ultimately drives the story of Prodicus.’²¹¹ However, the Prodican Hercules is generally associated with morality, duty, intellect and endeavour, while the associated adjective ‘Herculean’ is defined in similarly positive terms.²¹² It is this interpretation of the character that informs the Steve Reeves incarnation.

While space does not allow for a detailed history of the *peplum* genre, it is important to provide some context and background information. As noted, *Hercules* is widely regarded as the first of the *peplum* cycle, though the origins of the genre can be traced back to the silent era. Italian cinema produced a number of classical epics during this period, including

²⁰⁵ Blanshard, *Hercules. A Heroic Life* (London: Granta Books, 2005) p.92

²⁰⁶ Galinsky, 1972, p.3

²⁰⁷ Uhlenbrock, 1986, p.10

²⁰⁸ Galinsky, 1972, pp.29, 42

²⁰⁹ Galinsky, 1972, p.101

²¹⁰ Galinsky, 1972, p.102

²¹¹ Blanshard, 2005, p.38

²¹² For example, *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines Herculean as ‘requiring the strength of a Hercules; very hard to perform’; ‘having enormous strength, courage, or size’ (New York/Avenel, New Jersey: Gramercy Books, 1989, p.664).

Quo Vadis? (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912)²¹³ and *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914). As Jon Solomon notes, classical antiquity was a popular fixture in late nineteenth century theatre, literature and education in Europe, Britain and the United States.²¹⁴ Film producers looking for ‘respectable’ source material were quick to see the potential of the ancient Greco-Roman world. This strategy proved effective, as *Quo Vadis* and *Cabiria* were successful both in Italy and overseas, including the US market.²¹⁵ Several of these films included a muscle-bound man of action, often as a sidekick to the conventional romantic hero. *Quo Vadis* features Ursus (Latin for ‘bear’), who protects the heroine from various perils, including a rampaging bull. Maria Wyke cites *Spartaco* (Giovanni Enrico Vidali, 1913) for its muscular hero, who bends prison bars and ‘even stops momentarily to gaze on the taut bicep with which he effects his escape’.²¹⁶ *Cabiria* introduced Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano), referenced in Chapter One, a freed Nubian slave of exceptional strength who aids his Roman friend and former master in rescuing the title character. Maciste proved popular with audiences and Pagano reprised the character in a series of spin-off films. Peter Bondanella cites Maciste as an undoubted forerunner of the *peplum* genre.²¹⁷

Few classical epics were made in Italy after the First World War, when the industry was hit by an economic crisis.²¹⁸ By the end of the Second World War, the Italian film industry was in a moribund state. The domestic market had been flooded with US imports and there was, as Daniela Treveri Gennari notes, minimal demand for locally-produced films outside Italy.²¹⁹ During the late 1940s and early 1950s, attempts were made to re-launch popular forms of genre cinema that emphasised production values, international stars, exotic locations and spectacle, anticipating aspects—or generic dominants—of the *peplum* formula.²²⁰ *Fabiola* (Alessandro Blasetti, 1949), an Italian-French co-production, marked the return of the classical epic and Wyke credits the film as a significant local hit for an

²¹³ Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, 3rd edition (New York, London: Continuum, 2002) p.3

²¹⁴ Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001) p.3

²¹⁵ Bondanella, 2002, p.4

²¹⁶ Wyke, *Projecting the Past. Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997) p.44

²¹⁷ Bondanella, 2002, p.6. In *Cabiria*, Pagano plays Maciste as an African, his face and visible body covered in dark make-up. When Maciste became a lead character, Pagano played him as Caucasian.

²¹⁸ Bondanella, 2002, p.6

²¹⁹ Treveri Gennari, *Post-War Italian Cinema. American Intervention, Vatican Interests* (New York, London: Routledge, 2009) p.7

²²⁰ Treveri Gennari, 2009, p.56

otherwise depressed film industry.²²¹ Wyke also suggests its commercial success in Italy launched a trend for remakes of popular silent epics,²²² while conceding there were other factors at work. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw two developments in the American film industry that proved significant for the Italian cinema: the revival of the biblical epic and the re-launch of Hollywood production in Italy.²²³ Faced with a post-war decline in domestic audiences and the growing threat of television, US studios needed to rethink their production strategies. The success of *Samson and Delilah* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1949), both at home and abroad,²²⁴ suggested there was a market for large-scale epics that offered a level of opulence and spectacle impossible on the small screen. Around the same time, American studios looked for a way of reclaiming ‘frozen’ revenue from the Italian market which could not be repatriated under currency control laws.²²⁵ The solution was to shoot films in Italy, starting with *Prince of Foxes* (Henry King, 1949), a Renaissance-era melodrama that emphasised spectacle, followed by a remake of *Quo Vadis*²²⁶ (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), which proved hugely successful.

Italian-produced epics of this period include *Ulisse (Ulysses)*, (Mario Camerini, 1954), a relatively rare pre-peplum film excursion into Greco-Roman mythology, which arguably anticipated some of the ‘ground rules’ for the peplum revival that followed the success of *Hercules*. Importing an American lead, Kirk Douglas, the film reworked its classical source material, Homer’s *Odyssey*, into a series of spectacular set-pieces linked by the narrative thread of Ulysses’ long voyage home to his kingdom, wife and son. While *Quo Vadis* and *Helen of Troy* (Robert Wise, 1956) were American productions filmed in Italy, drawing on local resources and labour, *Ulysses* was an Italian-American co-production, between Lux Film, Ponti-De Laurentiis and Paramount. The American stars, writers and head cameraman worked alongside an otherwise Italian cast and crew. If Hollywood had

²²¹ Wyke, 1997, p.49

²²² Wyke, 1997, p.49. An earlier Italian film of *Fabiola* appeared in 1918.

²²³ *Ben-Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925) began filming in Rome in 1923, though the troubled production relocated to the United States. See Bondanella, 2002, pp.11-12.

²²⁴ As Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale note, the film was the biggest domestic hit of the 1949-1950 season and by 1955 had taken nearly \$8 million. *Samson and Delilah* was also popular in foreign markets, taking over \$6 million (source: Hall and Neale, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2010), p.136).

²²⁵ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci, *Hollywood & Europe: Economics, Culture and National Identity 1945-95* (London: British Film Institute, 1998) pp.8-9

²²⁶ Much of the film’s then-record \$7.6 million budget was covered by frozen lira and sterling, the latter accessible due to the substantial number of British actors in the cast (source: Hall and Neale, 2010, p.137).

primacy over the Italian film industry in the production of classical epics, the latter could claim to have originated the genre and helped sustain it, albeit on an irregular basis.

Hercules originated in the context of a cross-cultural cinematic tradition located principally within the Italian and American film industries. Neither existed independently of wider historical, social and economic contexts and I will consider these as they become pertinent to my central argument. While there is no definitive motivating factor in the creation of *Hercules*, a combination of elements in the mid-1950s made its production both viable and desirable.²²⁷

Hercules was shot at Cinecittá Studios, in Rome, from June to August 1957.²²⁸ In some respects, it marked the continuation in modified form of an existing cycle of films rather than the start of a new genre. The director and co-writer Pietro Francisci had a background in historical adventure films that emphasised spectacle and action, including *Il leone di Amalfi* (*The Lion of Amalfi*, 1950), *La regina di Saba* (*The Queen of Sheba*, 1952), *Attila* (1954) and *Orlando e i paladini di Francia* (*Roland the Mighty*, 1956). From an industrial and economic perspective, *Hercules* was a logical extension of the adventure film, incorporating a mythological element that *Ulysses* had shown to be commercially viable in the international marketplace.

My principal interest in *Hercules* is the film's construction of super-masculinity in the form of its title character. A crucial component of this strategy is the casting of Steve Reeves, winner of Mr. Pacific Coast (1946), Mr. Western America (1947), Mr. America (1947), Mr. World (1948) and Mr. Universe (1950).²²⁹ This casting raises a number of

²²⁷ While the film had clear antecedents in both Italian and American cinema, there had been relatively few features based around the character of Hercules. It is generally believed that the first Hercules film was the French-produced animated short *Les Douze travaux d'Hercule* (Emile Cohl, 1910), released in the US as *Hercules and the Big Stick* (1910) (Solomon, 2001, p.102). The character reappeared in animated form in the US-made *Popeye Meets Hercules* (Bill Tytla, 1948) and *Greek Mirthology* (Seymour Kneitel, 1954), which casts Popeye as Hercules. One of the first Italian films to use the name is *Il trionfo di Ercole* (Francesco Bertolini, 1922), starring wrestler Giovanni Raicevich. Hercules would not (re)appear in an Italian-made film for 36 years so it can be said with certainty that the Italian cinema had no tradition of Hercules films prior to 1958.

²²⁸ Tim Lucas, *Mario Bava. All the Colors of the Dark* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Video Watchdog Publishing, 2007) p.192

²²⁹ Anne Bolin defines bodybuilding as 'working out with weights to reshape the physique by adding muscle mass and increasing separation and definition of the various muscle groups' (Bolin, 'Bodybuilding', *The Encyclopedia of World Sport*, eds David Levinson and Karen Christensen (Oxford: ABC Clio, 1996) p.50).

questions, two of which I will address here. Firstly, to what extent is it significant that the role was played by an American rather than an Italian? Secondly, why was a bodybuilder cast as Hercules, rather than, say, an established actor, a promising newcomer or even a star name, as when Kirk Douglas played Ulysses in the 1954 film? The reasons may be reducible to expedience: the producers required a tall, good-looking and heavily muscled star to fit their conception—and anticipated audience expectations—of a heroic demigod. I suggest that, whatever the intentions, the casting of Reeves enabled a projection or performance of heroic masculinity while simultaneously contributing to its inherent instability.

The presence of an American film or bodybuilding star in an Italian production can be related to a wider context, namely the post-war Americanisation of Italy. The relationship between the two countries in the late 1940s and 1950s can be characterised as one-sided dependency. G. Warner argues: ‘the most important factor which determined the way in which Italy developed—politically, economically and socially—in the decade following the Second World War was her inclusion in the American sphere of influence as opposed to that of the Soviet Union.’²³⁰ As a defeated country with a struggling economy and infrastructure, Italy was both dependent on and vulnerable to the foreign policies of the dominant nations. In terms of Soviet influence, the US regarded Italy as being in a particularly exposed position, geographically and militarily.²³¹ As Treveri Gennari notes, there was a strong US presence in Italy, both economic and military, from 1943²³² and Italy became a signatory to the US-led North Atlantic Treaty on 4 April 1949, completing its integration into the Western camp.²³³ To counter and eliminate communist influence in Western Europe, US foreign policy promoted prosperity through productivity and consumption,²³⁴ Italy participating in the Marshall Aid programme.²³⁵ The American

The first major bodybuilding contest was held in 1901, in the UK (sources: Bolin, 1996, pp.50-54; Ellis Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sports*, 3rd edition (London, New York: Routledge, 2000) p.141).

²³⁰ Warner, ‘Italy and the Powers, 1943-49’, *The rebirth of Italy 1943-50*, ed. S.J. Woolf (London: Longman, 1972, pp.30-56) p.30

²³¹ Warner, 1972, p.55

²³² Treveri Gennari, 2009, p.3

²³³ Warner, 1972, pp.55-56

²³⁴ Treveri Gennari, 2009, p.5

²³⁵ M. De Cecco, ‘Economic Policy in the Reconstruction Period, 1945-51’, *The rebirth of Italy 1943-50*, ed. S.J. Woolf (London: Longman, 1972, pp.156-180) p.177

presence in post-war Italy manifested itself on various levels, including that of popular culture and entertainment.

The casting of a Hollywood star in an Italian-produced film was by no means unusual at the time.²³⁶ As Christopher Wagstaff notes,²³⁷ a shortage of Italian male leads for dramatic roles in the 1950s led to the use of American actors. A recession in Hollywood and increased American production in Italy made US stars both available and relatively inexpensive. The presence of a Hollywood ‘name’ also made the films more exportable.²³⁸ American actors working in Italy during this period include Kirk Douglas, Anthony Quinn, Henry Fonda, Broderick Crawford, Richard Basehart and Steve Cochran. While the wider ramifications of this American ‘invasion’ lie outside the scope of this thesis, it is arguable that these Hollywood stars served as standard bearers for the Americanisation of Italian and by extension European film production and, more broadly, European culture in general. Within this context, the casting of an American as Hercules was hardly remarkable in terms of industry practice or audience expectation, especially given Douglas’ recent appearance as Ulysses.

Though not a film star as such, Reeves had modest acting experience, including the MGM musical *Athena* (Richard Thorpe, 1954), a title with its own classical associations, which billed him as ‘Steve Reeves, “Mr Universe of 1950”’. His image as a ‘star’ body builder was perpetuated largely by personal appearances and coverage in such specialist magazines as *Strength & Health*, *Physique Pictorial*, *Muscular Development*, *Muscle Builder*, *Muscle Power*, *Mr. Universe*, *Athletic Model Guild* and *Body Beautiful*. I will discuss one of these magazines, *Mr. Universe*, and the representations of masculinity it promoted and perpetuated in more detail below. As an American ‘star’ name, albeit in a field as yet unrelated to films, Reeves also had a greater potential international appeal than

²³⁶ The Roman epic *Fabiola* (Blasetti, 1949) features three French stars—Michele Morgan, Henri Vidal, Michel Simon—in lead roles. Clearly, neither the Italian film industry nor local audiences were notably resistant to imported stars, even if the film was set in Italy’s illustrious ancient past.

²³⁷ Wagstaff, ‘Italian genre films in the world market’, from *Hollywood & Europe: Economics, Culture and National Identity 1945-95*, eds Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci (London: British Film Institute, 1998, pp.74-85) p.76

²³⁸ Wagstaff, 1998, p.76

an Italian actor whose local popularity might not extend to other countries.²³⁹ A French poster for *Hercules* promoted Reeves as ‘le celebre “Monsieur Univers”’.

Reeves had competed outside the US²⁴⁰ and was certainly known in Europe, figuring in British and French specialist magazines such as *Mr. Universe*, *Santé et Force* (Health and Strength), *La Culture Physique* and *Venus Apollon* from the mid-1940s, a decade before *Hercules* was produced. Mary P. Wood notes that the US fashion for bodybuilding had spread to Italy by the early 1950s.²⁴¹ This statement is partly contradicted by actor Mimmo Palmara, who co-starred in *Hercules*, who has claimed that bodybuilding was largely unknown in Italy when the film was being cast.²⁴² In the same interview, Palmara takes credit for bringing Reeves, with his extraordinary body and ‘angel face’, to Francisci’s attention. In a 1994 interview, Reeves stated that Francisci’s daughter had seen *Athena* on its Italian release and recommended Reeves to her father.²⁴³ While neither claim qualifies as documentary evidence, it seems reasonable to suggest that Reeves’ fledgling US film career was a factor in his casting as *Hercules* alongside his status and celebrity as a world champion bodybuilder. As Wood observes, Italian audiences had warmed to local stars with sporting backgrounds, such as Raf Vallone (football) and Vittorio Gassman (basketball).²⁴⁴ Though not as heavily muscled or ‘sculpted’ as Reeves, ‘physicality marked them out as different from the non-professional actors [associated with neo-realism] who played peasants, fishermen, the unemployed. Their size, athleticism, [and] vigorous gestures indicated their force, their virility and their *health*.’²⁴⁵ The confident, aggressively heterosexual masculinity represented by these stars highlighted their bodies

²³⁹ Mary Wood notes that a number of post-war Italian male stars had strong physiques. Newcomer Renato Salvatori was famous for his physical presence and well-developed body; the latter was often placed on display and made the focus of attention, as in *Poveri ma belli* (US: *Poor but Handsome*, UK: *Girl in a Bikini*, Dino Risi, 1956), which casts Salvatori as a lifeguard. (Wood, “Pink Neorealism” and the Rehearsal of Gender Roles 1946-55’, from *The Trouble with Men. Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema*, eds Phil Powrie, Ann Davies and Bruce Babington (London & New York: Wallflower, 2004, pp.134-143) p.139)

²⁴⁰ The 1948 Mr. World contest was held in Cannes, in the south of France. Reeves was the subject of a locally produced short film, *Le Plus Belle Homme Du Monde*, (‘The World’s Handsomest Man’, 1948).

²⁴¹ Wood, *Italian Cinema* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005) p.71. An Italian newsreel item on *Hercules* shows Reeves in costume, flexing his muscles and lifting arc lights while a narrator lists his bodybuilding titles. A woman dressed in a bikini measures Reeves’ biceps, equating his built body and sporting prowess with heterosexual virility (source: documentary film *Uomini Forti (Iron Men)*, Steve Della Casa, 2006)).

²⁴² Della Casa, 2006.

²⁴³ Roy Frumkes (ed.), ‘An Interview with Steve Reeves’, *The Perfect Vision* Volume 6 Issue 22, July 1994, reproduced on drkrm.com.

²⁴⁴ Wood, 2004, p.139

²⁴⁵ Wood, 2004, p.139

without reservation or apology. Reeves could convey these qualities on a grander scale ideally suited to the role of the demigod Hercules.

Press coverage of *Hercules*, in Italy and elsewhere, invited readers and viewers to recognise and appreciate the factors that served to create and present Steve Reeves as the new cinematic incarnation of Hercules. An edition of *La Tribuna illustrata*, a weekly Italian current affairs magazine, dated June 30 1957 (while *Hercules* was in production), included a picture of Reeves in its 'Events of the Week' pages (*fig.1*). A brief caption refers to Reeves as 'the new Hercules', citing his Mr. Universe title, his location by the river Tevere, in Rome, and his ability to lift co-star Sylva Koscina 'as if she were a feather'.²⁴⁶ Dressed only in white bathing trunks, Reeves displays his exceptional or Herculean physique, while engaging in a show of strength associated with both the mythical hero and the strongman/bodybuilding culture. Posed against a recognisable Rome landmark, bearing an established starlet of Italian films on his shoulder, Reeves is assimilated into the Italian landscape on various levels: industrial, cultural, mythical and geographic. I am wary of making too direct a link between Reeves as Hercules and the multifaceted US presence in post-war Italy. It is however arguable the latter facilitated to whatever degree his acceptability as an example of high-profile Americanisation both benevolent and powerful. Newsreel images of Reeves working out include shots with Italian youths exercising in the background (*fig.2*), underlining his status as a positive role model.

²⁴⁶ *La Tribuna illustrata*, Anno 67 – N. 26, 30 Giugno 1957, p.5. My translation.



Fig.1 *La Tribuna illustrata* – Steve Reeves and Sylva Koscina



Fig.2 Steve Reeves promotes *Hercules*

The UK press book for *Hercules*, unconcerned with Reeves' assimilation into Italian life, focused instead on his 'natural' casting as Hercules, noting how his early film aspirations were thwarted when he 'was told that he was too big and would dwarf the other players, except in some special part.'²⁴⁷ This implies the young Reeves was already too hyper-masculine to be cast in a regular film role, requiring a suitably extraordinary or legendary character to match his physique. Thus Reeves and Hercules were an ideal fit, 'a man with the most perfect physique, rivalling the demi-god himself'.²⁴⁸ The press book also claims, inaccurately, that Reeves is making his film debut as Hercules, linking further performer and character, and predicting screen immortality for Reeves on a par with that of the demigod.²⁴⁹

Throughout his career in *pepla*, Reeves would be acknowledged and defined by the popular press almost exclusively in terms of his body and what they took it to represent. An anonymous report in the British newspaper *The Guardian* claimed that Reeves' 'only qualification as a cinema actor is the physique that won him the title "Mr. Universe"'.²⁵⁰ This is clearly intended as a derogatory remark, questioning and undermining Reeves' status as a film star. Even when the critical response was less negative, the terminology employed tended to highlight the star's physique. Discussing *Duel of the Titans*, an anonymous Italian reviewer referred to the climactic fight between Reeves and Scott as 'the super duel between the two super torsos'.²⁵¹ I will now examine the significance of this torso in relation to 1950s body culture and wider debates on masculinity during this era.

²⁴⁷ *Hercules* UK press book (London: Archway Film Distributors, 1959) p.3

²⁴⁸ *Hercules* UK press book, 1959, p.3

²⁴⁹ *Hercules* UK press book, 1959, p.3

²⁵⁰ Anon, "'Hercules' the favourite", *The Guardian*, December 8, 1960, p.21. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* review for *Hercules* also emphasised Reeves' career as a bodybuilder (Vol XXVI, Nos. 300-311, 1959, p.71).

²⁵¹ Source: *Nuovo Spettatore Cinematografico*, n.30/31, April 1962; quoted in Gianfranco Casadio, *I mitici eroi. Il cinema 'peplum' nel cinema italiano dall'avvento del sonoro a oggi (1930-1993)* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2007) p.236. My translation.

Framing the Super-Torso

Reeves' status as a bodybuilder is worth exploring further, as the association of bodybuilding culture and the classical world that underpins *Hercules* was hardly a new phenomenon. Discussing cinematic representations of Ancient Greece, Gideon Nisbet suggests the progression from competitive bodybuilding to playing Hercules was a more-or-less logical one: 'To become a bodybuilder was already to emulate Hercules, within a discipline that had always consciously modelled itself on the hero's feats of strength.'²⁵² Nisbet makes a valid point, in that the adjective 'Herculean' was employed frequently in bodybuilding literature. Reeves had posed for magazines such as *Demi-Gods* and *Grecian Guild Studio Quarterly*, the titles of which drew clear parallels with the classical world and its attendant mythology. His magazine work included a series of photographs entitled 'The Twelve Labours of Hercules'.²⁵³

I would suggest that this conscious modelling was as much to do with legitimisation as inspiration or aspiration. Wyke traces the origins of modern bodybuilding to the late nineteenth century, in the circuses and funfairs of Europe and the United States, where 'the practice of putting highly defined musculature on public display drew its initial context and much of its validation from the ancient world.'²⁵⁴ A performer evoking and emulating the heroes and gods of Greco-Roman myth was not simply putting on a muscle show to impress or titillate an audience for monetary gain, but working in a culturally and aesthetically valid tradition. As Blanshard states, circus strongmen often wore leopard or lion skins in emulation of Hercules and 'carnival imagery was replete with classical allusions designed to add touches of exoticism and class to the various acts.'²⁵⁵ The 'Herculean' strongman was part of a wider nineteenth-century culture of classically inspired spectacle, both in Europe and the United States. In 1888 circus showmen Barnum and Bailey's *Nero, or the Destruction of Rome* was staged at the Olympia in London, with

²⁵² Nisbet, *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006) pp.48-49

²⁵³ Lucas, 2007, p.197

²⁵⁴ Wyke, 'Herculean Muscle!: The Classicizing Rhetoric of Body Building', from *Constructions of the Classical Body*, ed. James I. Porter (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) pp. 355 and 357.

²⁵⁵ Blanshard, 2005, p.153

a credited cast of 2000 that included athletes and gladiators.²⁵⁶ While the strongman acts initially featured displays of weightlifting or horsemanship, Wyke notes how later variations ‘wholly focused on the representation of classical figures familiar from statues and paintings’.²⁵⁷ Italian performers in this tradition included Mario Guaita Ausonia, billed as the ‘gladiator of the early nineteen hundreds’, who went on to play the lead in *Spartaco* (Giovanni Enrico Vidali, 1913).²⁵⁸ This emphasis on display rather than skill or action would be carried over into modern bodybuilding and have ramifications for the representation of masculinity in the *peplum* genre.

Bodybuilding magazines of the 1950s placed images of their stars in the context of articles that blended aspiration, instruction, inspiration and references to classical art. I will discuss briefly three British editions of *Mr. Universe*, an American-based magazine published by Joseph Weider, a leading figure in the field of competitive bodybuilding. The credited editors and contributors to *Mr. Universe* included Steve Reeves and the magazine declared itself ‘written and prepared by perfect men title winners’.²⁵⁹ This emphasis on physical perfection, competition and triumph is, unsurprisingly, the dominant discourse of the magazine and, I suggest, also underpins *Hercules* and the *peplum* genre as a whole. The January 1955 issue of *Mr. Universe*, Vol.2 No.1, features such headlines as ‘Here’s How You Can Easily Improve Your Physical Appearance’, the implication being that any man with the determination and dedication could achieve this transformation without excessive or unreasonable effort. Features include ‘So You Want Biceps Like The Champions’ and ‘Musclebuilder of the Month’, suggesting that a physique of world class proportions could be attained. An article entitled ‘You Can Pose Artistically’ underlines the widely accepted notion that a well-developed physique in and of itself was insufficient to achieve champion status; this body had to be displayed in a series of prescribed poses that conformed to culturally determined notions of the ‘artistic’. *Mr. Universe* August 1955, Vol.2 No.8, offers a similar range of articles, including ‘They were all weaklings but look at them NOW!’, ‘Exercise of the Month: The Leg Raise’, ‘Here’s How to Deepen Your Chest’ and ‘Cheat Your Way To Lifeguard Shoulders’. My principal interest in this issue of *Mr.*

²⁵⁶ Blanshard, 2005, p.153

²⁵⁷ Wyke, 2002, p.357

²⁵⁸ Wyke, *Projecting the Past. Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997) pp.44-45

²⁵⁹ *Mr. Universe*, August 1955, Vol. 2 No. 8, p.3

Universe is the cover illustration (fig.3), based on a photograph of a heavily muscled young man, seated on a cushion.

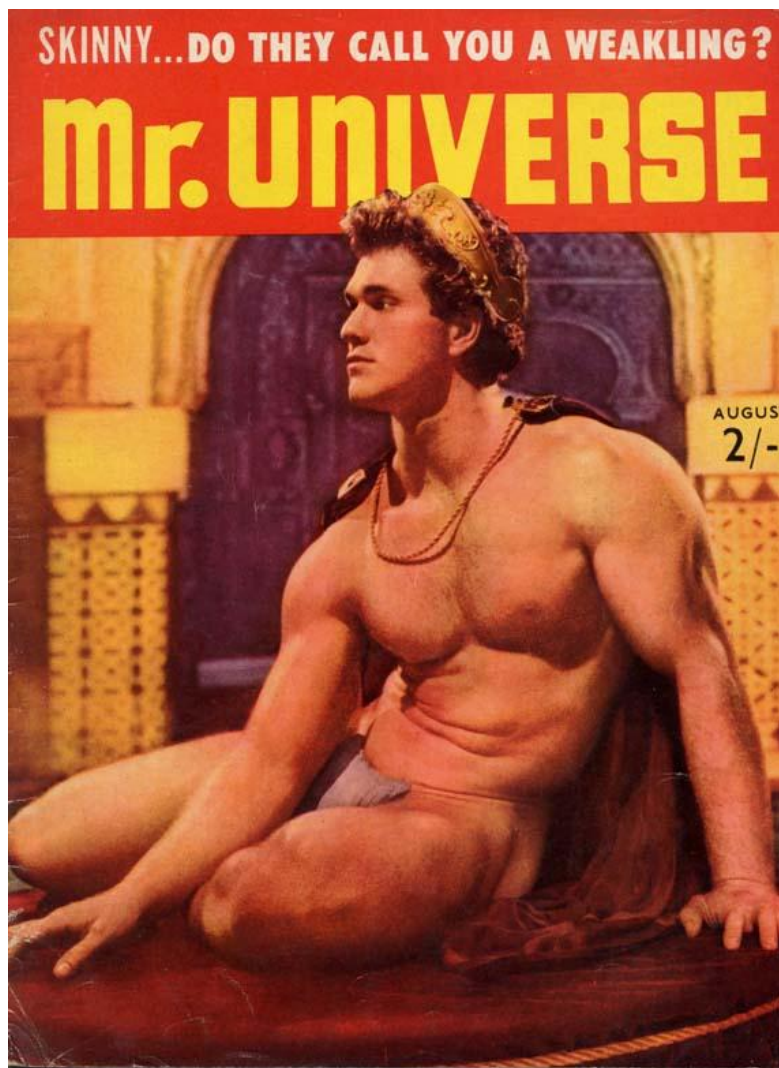


Fig.3 *Mr. Universe*

The positioning of the model emphasises both his physique, highlighting the torso and arms, and his profile. The expression is impassive, yet suggests an awareness of being looked at. Two aspects of the image are of particular interest. Firstly, the near-naked model is in pseudo-classical garb, wearing a gold crown and a cloak. The backdrop of a large double door and a section of wall also suggest a classical setting. As noted above, the appeal to Greco-Roman tradition had long been evoked to contextualise and legitimise the display of the male physique. Robin Osborne cites Classical Greece as ‘the cultural

reference point by which the public display of the naked male body is justified'.²⁶⁰ As a static image emphasising both the body and the 'noble' profile, this illustration could be compared—however speciously—with a classical painting or statue. The cover model is billed as 'Bud Counts, California Hercules', another appeal to classical tradition and a direct identification with a hero of Greco-Roman myth. Classical images of Hercules often presented the demigod naked, identified by his wooden club and lion skin.

The second aspect I would like to highlight is the passivity of the model. Arranged in a sitting position, with legs folded and arms rested on the cushion, the figure holds no suggestion of action, strain or even tension. The aggression and violence associated with the Hercules of myth are nowhere to be found. This picture may not be typical of the images featured in *Mr. Universe* or 1950s bodybuilding publishing as a whole. Nevertheless, its use as the cover illustration suggests this representation of masculinity was not regarded as problematic with respect to the magazine's image and target readership. Clearly, the achievement and display of a muscular body was in itself sufficient to confer heroic or mythic status. Within bodybuilding culture, the figure of Hercules could be evoked or emulated as the ultimate role model. Steve Reeves would go a step further, representing or embodying Hercules in a filmic narrative, his performance of masculinity framed and legitimised within another form of performance. This 'California Hercules' would become the classical Hercules. The May 1958 issue of *Mr. Universe*, Vol.5 No.5, featured Reeves as Hercules on the front cover, along with the broken chains that contribute to one of the film's most iconic images. Though hardly the best-timed promotion for the film, which would not open in the UK for another year, the *Mr. Universe* cover acknowledged, endorsed and associated itself with Reeves as the new embodiment of Hercules.

At this point, I would like to engage with a wider debate on cultural representations of masculinity during the 1950s. The California-based bodybuilding community offered an extreme manifestation of a highly visible male identity located in and around the body. Steven Cohan suggests that social and political factors in America and elsewhere had

²⁶⁰ Osborne, 'Men Without Clothes: Heroic Nakedness and Greek Art', from *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Maria Wyke (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, pp.80-104) p.80

contributed to a pervasive anxiety over masculine identity and potency: ‘The postwar “free man” had to depend upon the state to preserve his independence in the face of the communist threat, thereby calling into question the myth of rugged, rebellious, and masculine American individuality.’²⁶¹ Direct linkage of this nature is problematic and the myth of rugged American masculinity had been called into question before. As John F. Kasson states, at the turn of the twentieth century, ‘perceptions of manliness were drastically altered by the new dynamics created by vast corporate power and immense concentrations of wealth.’²⁶² If power and wealth were now associated with corporations, these qualities could no longer be linked so readily—if at all—with the autonomy and independence traditionally embodied by American manhood. It is notable that bodybuilder Eugene Sandow made his US debut in 1893, at a time of economic depression accompanied by a perceived loss of masculine independence and control.²⁶³ Invoking a classical, pre-modern tradition Sandow promoted an ideal of individual achievement, power and worth located in and expressed by the strong male body, implying, as Kasson notes, ‘a transformation of self and of social standing.’²⁶⁴ Another form of male anxiety was manifested during the post-World War I era, when Hollywood star Rudolph Valentino was attacked as effeminate and unmanly.²⁶⁵ This criticism was inextricably linked with a xenophobic attitude towards Valentino’s Italian national identity and a sense of otherness that was ‘contaminating’ the American male, in contrast to the hyper-masculine, American-born Douglas Fairbanks and the physical culture he aggressively promoted. I would concur, however, that the muscular, virile images of masculinity promoted during the 1950s could reflect, to whatever extent, an underlying anxiety about the worth of this masculinity. With the concept of a ‘free man’ qualified to a damaging degree by his dependence on government for stability and protection, the myth of the self-sufficient male could only be sustained through prescribed cultural forms, such as the bodybuilder or the movie star. A man who lacked social, economic or political control and power could at least control his own body and create an impression of individual power, evoking Sandow’s earlier incarnation of the ‘self-made’ man.

²⁶¹ Cohan, *Masked Men. Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) p.134

²⁶² Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man. The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001) p.11

²⁶³ Kasson, 2001, p.23

²⁶⁴ Kasson, 2001, p.223

²⁶⁵ See Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade. Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) pp.150-198

Cohan is concerned largely with mainstream American cinema of this era, citing the representation of William Holden in *Picnic* (Joshua Logan, 1955) as a prime example of ‘Hollywood’s investment in the spectacle of the male body during this period... The film is organised, in both its cinematic address and its narrative, around the body of its male star.’²⁶⁶ Though differing greatly in form and content from *Hercules* and subsequent *pepla*, *Picnic* shared a preoccupation with the open display of the male body and surrounding debates on masculinity. A number of 1950s Hollywood stars were noted for their virile, aggressively heterosexual display of masculinity, including Holden, Burt Lancaster, Rock Hudson and Kirk Douglas. I would argue that Douglas represents a prime example of this masculinity, making his appearance in the proto-*peplum* *Ulysses* especially significant. While *Ulysses* foregrounds Douglas’ athletic physique, most notably in a wrestling scene, it achieves an extra level of significance in the closing stages of the film. Ulysses has disguised himself as a beggar, wearing ragged robes and a hood that conceal his body, though his face is clearly visible. Confronting his enemies, Ulysses throws off his robe, revealing just a short skirt and leather belt. It is this exposure of the body—rather than the face—to signal the climactic combat and reassertion of heroic masculinity that links *Ulysses* most strongly with *Hercules*.

Reflecting contemporary constructions of masculinity and surrounding debates, Reeves’ *Hercules* also evoked the muscle-bound heroes of Italian silent cinema. To borrow Wyke’s description of Ursus in the 1912 film version of *Quo Vadis?*, *Hercules* marked the return of the strongman of honourable purpose, whose body shape and moral virtue were inextricably linked in his defence of the weak and defeat of oppressors.²⁶⁷ This construction of *Hercules* is somewhat at odds with the pre-Prodican figure of Greco-Roman mythology, whose superhuman strength was not linked initially to high moral purpose or noble deeds. The concept fits more neatly with the promotion of the US-based body culture of the 1950s, where the male body had to be honed and shaped into an instrument of heroic action or at least display. In the next section, I will discuss how *Hercules* constructed its representation of a super-masculinity.

²⁶⁶ Cohan, 1997, p.167

²⁶⁷ Wyke, 2002, p.361

'He must truly be the son of Jupiter!'

Hercules announces itself as 'freely adapted' from its only credited source, Apollonius Rhodios' poem *The Argonautica*. This provides the basis for the second half of the film, covering the quest for the Golden Fleece. The plot can be summarised as follows: Hercules (Steve Reeves) is summoned to the city of Jolco by its ruler King Pelias (Ivo Garrani), to serve as tutor to his son, Prince Iphitus (Mimmo Palmara). En route, Hercules rescues the latter's sister, Princess Iole (Sylva Koscina), when her chariot runs out of control. Jolco has been ruled by Pelias since the murder of his brother, King Eson, and the disappearance of Eson's son, Prince Jason (Fabrizio Mioni), and the sacred Golden Fleece. Eson's assassin was never identified, though many suspect Pelias. While Iole falls in love with Hercules, Iphitus feels threatened by the latter's strength. When Hercules fights the man-eating Nemean Lion, Iphitus intervenes and is killed by the beast. Pelias and Iole blame Hercules and he is ordered to fight the Cretan Bull as an act of penance. Rejected by Iole, Hercules renounces his immortality, demanding to live, and love, as a mortal man. After defeating the bull, he discovers Jason living in exile. They return to Jolco, where Jason proclaims himself the rightful king. Pelias agrees to give up the throne if Jason can bring him the Golden Fleece. The latter is to be found on the island of Colchides, a long and perilous journey. Jason and Hercules assemble a crew for the sea voyage on their ship *The Argo*. Determined that Jason should fail, Pelias puts his henchman Eurysteus (Arturo Dominici) on board to sabotage the mission. The quest is interrupted when the Argonauts land on the island of the Amazons. Jason is entranced by their queen, Antea (Gianna Maria Canale), and has to be rescued by Hercules. Jason recovers the Golden Fleece and learns Eson was murdered on Pelias' order. The Argonauts return to Jolco, only for Eurysteus to steal the fleece and deliver it to Pelias. Confronting Pelias, Hercules falls through a trapdoor into a dungeon, his unconscious body bound with chains. A fight breaks out between the Argonauts and Pelias' soldiers, who are finally defeated by the revived Hercules. Pelias drinks poison and tells Iole her future lies with Hercules. Jason becomes the new king, while Hercules and Iole are reconciled.

Hercules equates male potency with spectacle, each quality reinforcing and validating the other. In the opening sequence, the uprooting of a tree (*fig.4*) signifies the presence of Hercules, foregrounding his attributes, effects and spectacle. His appearance is heralded by the performance of a feat impossible for an ordinary man. Hercules is a larger-than-life figure, both in terms of his physical attributes—height, build—and his supernatural transcendence of human limitations. Herculean masculinity is represented throughout the film by acts of physical strength that no other character can emulate: lifting trees, bending metal objects, fighting wild beasts. Each manifestation of his extraordinary strength serves to underline its unique character. The introduction of Hercules can be compared with the first appearance of Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano) in *Cabiria*. Maciste is placed in the foreground of the frame, dressed in a white robe that leaves his arms and torso exposed (*fig.5*). This shot lasts around 40 seconds, lingering on the dominant figure of Maciste, whose very presence, in terms of lighting, framing and Pagano's physique, connotes his strength. By contrast, Hercules' presence is from the start equated with action, specifically the performance of a heroic deed in the service of another.



Fig.4 *Hercules*



Fig.5 *Cabiria*

The narrative structure highlights extended scenes emphasising the body as spectacle. Like the viewer, the supporting characters are placed in the position of spectators, responding to Hercules' feats of strength with admiration, awe, desire and fear. Discussing Hollywood crime films and westerns, Neale notes that 'both forms of voyeuristic looking, intra- and extra-diegetic, are especially evident in those moments of contest and combat...at which a narrative outcome is determined through a fight, at which male struggle becomes pure spectacle.'²⁶⁸ While the notion of 'pure spectacle' is contestable, I would concur that presenting narrative progression and resolution in the form of a physical struggle legitimises the resultant spectacle and associated voyeurism as a necessary, even crucial, component of the wider narrative arc. The most striking manifestation of Hercules' physical strength has him wrapping chains around two stone pillars of the royal palace (*fig.6*). A long shot places Hercules in the centre of the frame, his body standing out against a shadowed doorway. Two low angle medium long shots show Hercules pulling on the chains, his muscles straining. Wrenching the pillars out of position, he brings them and the section of roof they support down on the soldiers of Pelias, evoking the climax of the Hollywood-produced *Samson and Delilah* (1949) without the element of redemption and

²⁶⁸Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema', *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993) pp.16-17

self-sacrifice. This image defines the *peplum* genre as a whole: a tensed built male body performing a miraculous or superhuman feat of strength, not as mere narcissistic display or demonstration of brute force, but in the service of the forces of good. The chains that previously confined Hercules—connoting imprisonment, oppression, enslavement—are transformed into an extension of the male body that is the instrument of liberation.²⁶⁹ I would argue that Steve Reeves' Hercules was constructed to endorse prevailing notions of masculinity, albeit in an exaggerated, hyperbolic form.



Fig.6 *Hercules*

As stated above, *Hercules*' representation of masculinity proved to have wide popular appeal. Opening in Italy on 20 February 1958, *Hercules* grossed 887,384,717 lire,²⁷⁰ equivalent to US\$1,420,406 or £507,284,²⁷¹ three times its production cost. It was the most popular Italian film of the 1957-58 season,²⁷² outperformed only by six big-budget

²⁶⁹ US posters for *Hercules* highlight this image of Hercules unchained, which became the English title for the sequel. The image also dominates the Japanese promotion for the film. Hercules leans back slightly as he pulls on the chains, emphasising his taut, muscular physique, veins bulging on his forearms.

²⁷⁰ Source: Gianni Rondolino (ed.), *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965* (Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore, 1979) p.134

²⁷¹ Source: Pacific Exchange Rate Service, fx.sauder.ubc.ca; calculations courtesy of Raymond O'Brien.

²⁷² Vittorio Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico. Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945-1965* (Milan: Bompiani, 1974) p.328

Hollywood imports, led by *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956).²⁷³ *Hercules*' US success may have been exaggerated, not least by promoter Joseph E. Levine, but the film took around \$4.5 million in rentals.²⁷⁴ While box-office figures for other territories are elusive, *Hercules* was also distributed successfully in Europe, Latin America, South Africa, the Middle East, Australia and the Far East, creating markets where the *peplum* genre would flourish for the next few years.²⁷⁵

The reasons for *Hercules*' commercial success are not a central topic of my thesis. What interest me at this point, in terms of reception studies, are the commentators who link this success—directly or indirectly—with the film's representation of masculinity. Writing on the *peplum* genre in the early 1960s, Richard Whitehall suggested the films' uncomplicated heroics and clear-cut moral certainties suited the mood of the times.²⁷⁶ A hero without physical or mental flaws, who possessed an unshakeable sense of right and wrong and an unstoppable determination to ensure the former triumphed, provided an attractive source of escapism in an era marked by Cold War tensions between West and East. This socio-political contextualisation, though a valid methodological tool, becomes problematic when linked too directly with a specific film. Wyke reads the casting of Reeves in explicit Cold War terms: 'the resulting modern Hercules symbolised the victory of Beauty, Virility, and the American Way over a villainy depicted as monstrous, weak, and decidedly "Asiatic" ... a seemingly natural link was forged between muscularity, masculinity, justice, and the supremacy of the West'.²⁷⁷ This association of Reeves' Hercules with Beauty, or perhaps the Body Beautiful, is intriguing, yet the overall reading of the film seems simplistic and reductive. Characterising Hercules as a Cold Warrior, representing American strength, potency and integrity in a specific historical context, suggests that other interpretations of the film are at best secondary, if not redundant altogether. Furthermore, *Hercules* as a film text resists the pattern imposed by Wyke. The Italian actors cast as the

²⁷³ Source: chartitalia.blogspot.com. *Hercules* was placed seventh in the list of box-office hits for 1957-58 and was the highest listed non-Hollywood production.

²⁷⁴ Hall and Neale, 2010, p.172; see also Patrick Lucanio, *With Fire and Sword: Italian Spectacles on American Screens, 1958-68* (Metuchen, New Jersey and London: Scarecrow Press, 1994) p. 27 and p.13; Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York, London: Continuum, 2009) p.167.

²⁷⁵ Vittorio Spinazzola, 'Le Carnaval Des Demi-Dieux', *Cinema 64*, ed. Pierre Philippe (Paris, No.85 April 1964) p.53

²⁷⁶ Whitehall, 'Days of Strife and Nights of Orgy', *Films and Filming*, March 1963, Volume 9, Number 6, pp.8-9

²⁷⁷ Wyke, 2002, p.370

villains are not Asiatic in appearance and the scenario of antagonistic superpowers is notably absent, even in veiled form.

As noted in Chapter One, a number of commentators, including Mira Liehm, read the overtly escapist, non-realist *peplum* genre as a veiled critique of social and economic transformation within Italy at the time.²⁷⁸ The development of an industrial economy and the rise of the urban society²⁷⁹ diminished the economic worth of unskilled physical labour—a traditionally male preserve—in favour of labour based on skill with machines,²⁸⁰ which could be acquired and implemented by women as readily as men. As more women came into the workplace, transforming their economic and social status, the traditional gender roles were challenged. It was perhaps inevitable that the tension and upheaval created by this transformation would be reflected in the Italian cinema.²⁸¹ Those excluded from the economic boom, chiefly uneducated male manual labourers, could seek temporary solace in films that endorsed the enduring worth—moral, social and economic—of male physical strength. These changes were not confined to Italy, of course, and there is a case for suggesting that the wide appeal of the *peplum* hero reflected an international need for reassurance over the value of the strong male body in uncertain times. Discussing the concept of star charisma, Richard Dyer states that ‘charismatic appeal is effective especially when the social order is uncertain, unstable and ambiguous and when the charismatic figure or group offers a value, order or stability to counterpoise this.’²⁸² Embodying traditional moral values, Reeves’ Hercules restores both order and stability to the troubled kingdom of Jolco. This idea ties in with Cohan’s point about the perceived loss of rugged masculine individualism in the face of social, political and, I would add, economic pressures and anxieties during the 1950s. Whether read in Cold War, economic or social terms, the super-masculinity represented by *Hercules* had undisputed popular appeal. In the next section, I will explore how the film structured this masculinity in terms of an open display of the male body and the contradictions this creates.

²⁷⁸ Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) p.183

²⁷⁹ Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema 1896-1996* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996) p.115

²⁸⁰ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) p.169

²⁸¹ Goffredo Fofi, ‘Maciste Sugli Schermi’, from *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano*, 1979, p.ii-iii. My translation. **Note:** This essay appears on unnumbered pages between numbered pages 253 and 254. I have referenced the pages cited with roman numerals.

²⁸² Dyer, ‘Charisma’, *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. C.(hristine) Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991, pp.57-59) p.58

Hercules Displayed

The *peplum* genre is notable for giving the male body primacy over the female body, though both are presented to the spectator as objects of contemplation, admiration and desire.²⁸³ It should be stressed that this was not in itself a new or unknown strategy, though some commentators suggest otherwise. Discussing 1950s American cinema, Neale cites the musical as ‘the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way’.²⁸⁴ Neale is perhaps over-generalising here, and discussing Hollywood output in strictly generic terms risks excluding titles that do not conform readily to a widely recognised genre category. Dyer affirms that, ‘until the 1980s, it was rare to see a white man semi-naked in popular fictions’.²⁸⁵ While the art gallery, sports and pornography ‘offered socially sanctioned or cordoned-off images...the cinema only did so in particular cases’.²⁸⁶ Again this implies that these instances were few and far between which, I would argue, is not necessarily the case. Discussing Hollywood star Rudolph Valentino, Michael Williams suggests: ‘Films such as *The Son of the Sheik* (George Fitzmaurice, 1926) offer up the voyeuristic pleasure of gazing at the fetishised male body offered for view’.²⁸⁷ A scene where the main character is hung up and whipped provides ‘a diegetic excuse for close-ups of his [Valentino’s] body’.²⁸⁸ Exotic adventure films and serials such as *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, Charles Vidor, 1932), *Flash Gordon* (Frederick Stephani, 1936), *The Crimson Pirate* (Robert Siodmak, 1952) and *Against All Flags* (George Sherman, 1952) employ a similar strategy, with the hero stripped to the waist for both action and punishment. Films centred on a form of sport often highlighted the exposed male body, most obviously in boxing-related dramas such as

²⁸³ Maggie Günsberg notes, ‘It is on the female body as a whole or on its parts that the male-dominated culture industry of cinema generally focuses...for the prioritised male spectator’ (Günsberg, *Italian Cinema. Gender and Genre*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005, p.107)

²⁸⁴ Neale, ‘Masculinity as spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema’, *Screening the Male. Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993, pp.9-20) p.18.

²⁸⁵ Dyer, 1997, p.146

²⁸⁶ Dyer, 1997, p.146

²⁸⁷ Williams, *Ivor Novello. Screen Idol*. (London: BFI Publishing, 2003) p.16

²⁸⁸ Williams, 2003, p.115

Champion (Mark Robson, 1949), starring Kirk Douglas. The cycle of Tarzan films produced in Hollywood from the 1930s to the 1960s highlights an even more open display of the male physique,²⁸⁹ an example—or exception—acknowledged by Neale.²⁹⁰ Regarding screen Tarzan Johnny Weissmuller, Dyer notes how images of the loincloth-clad star emphasise his athletic body as the main object of contemplation while simultaneously denying associated notions of passivity: ‘Weissmuller is posed with his body turning, resting on his arms... [he] seems to be caught in action and his body is tensed... [he] looks up, in a characteristic pose of masculine striving.’²⁹¹ An exposed male body is an active body, a concept I discuss in more detail below. I would argue that *Hercules* participates in and extends this tradition by offering a new form of display, emphasising feats of strength and the sheer spectacle of the built male body—both in motion and at rest—over shows of agility or athleticism. Drawing on the same classical references and iconography that informed the bodybuilding culture, *Hercules* placed these bodies within narratives of trial, ordeal, conflict and triumph.

The display of heroic masculinity is crucial to *Hercules* yet its status as spectacle or performance reveals the fragility of its construction. *Hercules*’ representation of masculinity is complicated—and compromised—by the latent eroticism associated with displays of bare flesh. The *peplum* genre’s undercurrent of homoeroticism has been noted in academic studies, film criticism and the wider popular culture.²⁹² As I discussed in Chapter One, the emphasis on the muscular male body as the main object of contemplation is at odds with conventional notions of cinematic representation as erotic spectacle. For men to look at men, this look must be controlled, directed and legitimised in a way that nullifies or at least counters any suggestion of eroticism. Neale states that cinema as a

²⁸⁹ Walt Morton suggests that a Tarzan film ‘prioritises the physicality of the male body in action... Tarzan’s physique becomes the object of display’ (Morton, ‘Tracking the Sign of Tarzan: Trans-Media Representation of a Pop-Culture Icon’, *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men*, eds Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993, pp.106-125) p.114

²⁹⁰ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) p.56

²⁹¹ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987) p.118

²⁹² For example, Steve Reeves is referenced in the glam-rock musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, first performed in 1973, and its film adaptation *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975). In the song ‘Sweet Transvestite’, performed by the cross-dressing bisexual Frank N. Furter, Reeves’ films are described as ‘...something visual, that’s not too abysmal’. While the *peplum* cycle had ended a decade earlier, writer Richard O’Brien counted on audience familiarity with Reeves’ name, image, the type of film in which he appeared and the accompanying notions of ‘perfect’ masculinity and latent homo-eroticism. All of this dovetails into *The Rocky Horror Show*, where Dr. Furter creates his own perfect man, Rocky Horror, with ‘blond hair and a tan’, as a purpose-built sexual plaything.

whole has contended with the tensions and contradictions implicit in presenting the male body as spectacle while denying any element of homoeroticism: ‘male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed.’²⁹³ It can be argued that *Hercules* and subsequent *pepla* represent an extreme form of the ongoing struggle between the open display of the male physique and the systematic repression—and denial—of what this display implies in terms of erotic spectacle. The standard strategy cited by Neale for this ‘de-eroticisation’ is to present the exposed male body in a context of struggle. Images of violence against the body signify this repression. Furthermore, they disqualify the male body ‘as an object of erotic contemplation and desire’.²⁹⁴

There are obvious problems with this reading as applied to *Hercules*, demonstrated by the sequence with the Cretan Bull. Hercules is left with bloody wounds on his left shoulder and pectoral muscle, ostensibly denoting his new mortal status. However, the careful placing of the fake blood serves to enhance the impact of Steve Reeves’ exposed body rather than disqualify it as an object of contemplation. The wounded male body has a long tradition of display, including in Christian art, and the repression of this body has the paradoxical effect of heightening its spectacular appeal. This is a frequent strategy in action cinema, as well as other genres, and in religious art can be seen in images of martyrdom, especially Saint Sebastian. After Hercules falls through a trap door, there is a long shot of him lying on a dungeon floor, arms outstretched in a cruciform position, light reflecting off his face and arms. While *Hercules* is set in a pre-Christian world, the film was made in a Catholic country and it is unlikely the film-makers were unaware of this shot’s religious associations. In the case of *Hercules*, the strategy of repression and disqualification identified by Neale is ultimately unsuccessful, highlighting only its failure to contain the undercurrent of homoeroticism.

I would argue that the representation of the male body in *Hercules* suggests another strategy at work, that of expression rather than repression. The eroticism associated with

²⁹³Neale, 1993, p.19

²⁹⁴Neale, 1993, p.14

the passive display of bare flesh is countered by equating the male body with action. As noted in my discussion of *Mr. Universe*, the bodybuilding culture that supplied most of the *peplum* stars emphasised the male body in and of itself, rather than actions performed by the body.²⁹⁵ Wyke notes: ‘Concerned with the display of static moments of extreme physical tension, male bodybuilding involves the pleasures of looking at a muscular body that performs no other function than the display of itself.’²⁹⁶ The built body is its own achievement and does not require further validation or legitimisation through displays of skill or action. In *Hercules*, static poses combine with action or at least the impression of action. The muscular body of Hercules is more than a passive object of display. Discussing male pin-ups, Dyer argues that these images ‘counteract the passive, objectifying tendency by having the model tauten his body, glare at or away from the viewer, and look as if he is caught in action or movement’.²⁹⁷ Unlike still photography, a motion picture can (re)present actual movement, enhanced by framing, composition, editing and other cinematic tools. *Hercules* opens with the hero stopping a runaway chariot. With this action accomplished, he is seen at rest, though the ‘objectifying tendency’ identified by Dyer is countered by Hercules’ established role as active rescuer and by his own gaze at the prone Iole.

By highlighting display as action, *Hercules* attempts to legitimise its emphasis on the male body. Demonstrating the long bow and discus, Hercules strikes muscle-flexing poses, his tensed ‘perfect’ body contrasted with the slight build of the younger Ulysses (Gabriele Antonini). Leon Hunt states that in *peplum* films, ‘scene after scene contains “classic” body building poses which bear little or no relation to the script’.²⁹⁸ While this is an over-generalisation, it is the case that some *pepla* motivate their muscle-flexing set-pieces with more success than others. Discussing the discus scene in *Hercules*, Hunt argues that ‘little attempt is made to disguise the scene’s purpose in displaying those well-oiled pectorals for a predominantly male group of intra-diegetic admirers’,²⁹⁹ though the presence of Princess

²⁹⁵ Günsberg: ‘In one sense this contradicts the usual patriarchal binary apportioning of gender characteristics whereby femininity, and not masculinity, is defined and circumscribed by the body’ (Günsberg, 2005, p. 110)

²⁹⁶ Wyke, 2002, p.357. Bolin distinguishes competitive bodybuilding from other types of resistance training in that ‘it is the visible result of training – large, well-defined muscles – that is judged rather than any ability developed in the course of building those muscles’ (Bolin, 1996, p.50).

²⁹⁷ Dyer, 1986, p.117

²⁹⁸ Hunt, ‘What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic’, *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men*, 1993, pp.65-83, p.70

²⁹⁹ Hunt, 1993, pp.70-71

Iole serves as a token endorsement of heterosexual desire. Ostensibly training the young men of Jolco, Hercules is also performing for an audience of older men. Orpheus (Gino Matterna) directs his fellow elders—and the viewer—to ‘Look at him’, as the film cuts to a low-angle long shot of Hercules standing centre frame on the (moral) high ground, posed like an Olympic champion. The camera tracks in on Hercules, emphasising his heroic status.

Throughout *Hercules*, the lighting, camera angles and framing emphasise the iconic quality of Steve Reeves. In the scene where Hercules consults the Sybil (Lidia Alfonsi), a prophetess and mouthpiece of the gods, the former is placed on the far left of the frame, in semi-shadow. The lighting highlights the muscle definition on Reeves’ back and right arm, oiled better to catch the light. As Hercules raises and extends his arms to the heavens,³⁰⁰ rain begins to fall, water running down Reeves’ torso (*fig.7*). This image is repeated and exaggerated in a later storm scene, as sea water pours over his flexed muscles. The spectacular appeal of these scenes is arguably in the display of Reeves’ body, rather than the motivating actions, revealed as mere narrative pretext. Standing with his head tilted back and his arms outstretched, Hercules invites—even demands—the spectator’s attention. As *figs.4, 6* and *7* show, Reeves’ succession of minimal costumes permits his muscular, glistening torso and arms to be the focal point of almost every shot in which he appears. Placing Hercules in scenarios of action serves only to highlight further the body performing these actions. Neither repression of the male body nor its showcasing as an instrument of action can displace the homoeroticism associated with its display. Drawing on representations of hyper-masculinity constructed by 1950s body culture, *Hercules* also evokes the contradictions and tensions associated with this representation. I will now turn my attention to another key strategy for sustaining the construction of a heroic masculinity, namely the contrast with the representation of femininity. As discussed above, the 1950s marked a shift in traditional gender roles and status, both in Italy and elsewhere. *Hercules* reflects the corresponding male anxiety over this change and appears to endorse a traditional, conservative view of gender relations. In the next section, I will examine this

³⁰⁰ This image dominates the Yugoslav poster for the film. In an interesting enhancement, Hercules’ raised arms semi-encircle a black and white portrait of Iole, the primary reason for Hercules renouncing his immortality. His wrists bear the manacles and broken chains of the climactic battle. In this context, the image of violent liberation could suggest Hercules’ newly won freedom from the prison of immortality.

construction of gender difference and suggest that the representation of femininity is no more sustainable than that of masculinity.



Fig.7 *Hercules*

‘It’s very difficult to find a girl as beautiful as you are.’

Highlighting representations of masculinity, *Hercules* constructs femininity in terms of distraction, incomprehension and danger. This representation of sexual difference is problematic on multiple levels. Günsberg states that patriarchy associates ‘the feminine, domestic, familial, heterosexual sphere with passivity and inaction’.³⁰¹ The early scenes of *Hercules* appear to endorse this conservative and somewhat simplistic representation, Iole depicted as a figure of vulnerability, fainting into Hercules’ arms (*fig.8*). Her slender figure, pale make-up, tailored white tunic and gold ornamentation stand in contrast to Hercules’ muscular physique, black hair, tanned skin and dark animal fur garment. The casting of a bodybuilder as Hercules serves to emphasise the difference between male and

³⁰¹ Günsberg, 2005, p.111

female. Bolin argues that bodybuilding ‘exaggerates Western notions of gender difference – muscles denoting masculinity and signifying “biological” disparity between the genders’.³⁰² A strong, muscular figure can only be male as women, by their nature, cannot attain this form (although there are female bodybuilders and, moreover, a physique achieved through bodybuilding is itself hardly natural). Hercules and Iole are the first characters to interact and the repeated comparison of their bodies marks them as the film’s dominant masculine and feminine forms. Male strength, power and activity are contrasted with female weakness, powerlessness and passivity.

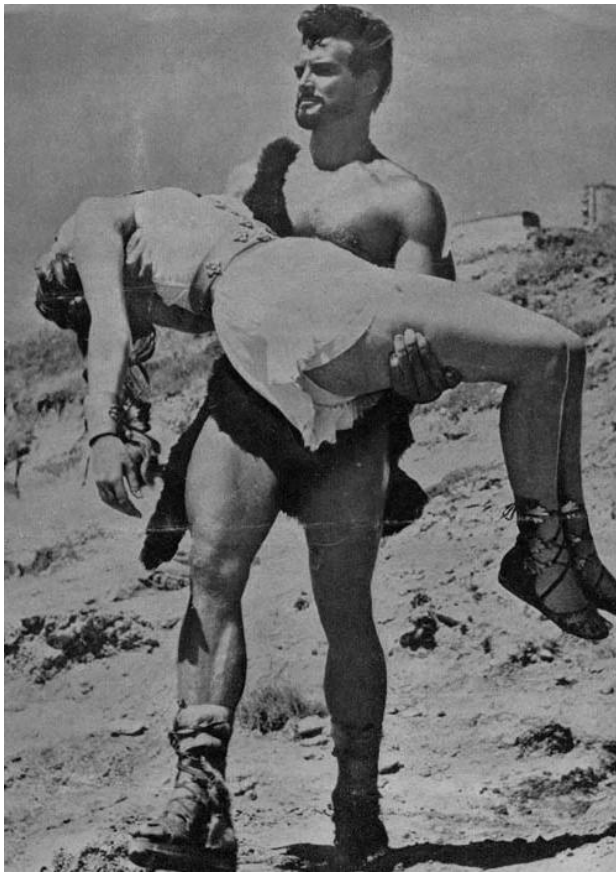


Fig.8 *Hercules*

As noted in Chapter One, Neale asserts that, in mainstream films, the look or gaze of the spectator is by implication male.³⁰³ On a more general level, Mulvey argues: ‘In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and

³⁰² Bolin, 1996, p.126

³⁰³ Neale, 1993, p.19

passive/female.’³⁰⁴ While Neale and Mulvey take differing positions in this wide area of debate, both suggest that within a patriarchal society the male is the looker while the female is the looked-at. In the early scenes of *Hercules*, Iole is the object of both Hercules’ and the viewer’s gaze, the camera lingering on her prone body (*fig.9*). Iole is the passive object of desire, Hercules the diegetic spectator and active agent.



Fig.9 *Hercules*

The apparently straightforward representation of gender difference is, however, revealed as another performance that cannot disguise the fragility and artificiality of its construction. There is a continual tension between establishing Hercules and Iole as a conventional heterosexual couple and distancing them from each other. Exchanges of looks and fleeting physical contact culminate in the classic embrace-and-kiss barely half an hour into the film. This moment is framed in a low-angle medium long shot that emphasises a backdrop of trees and sky, placing the union of Hercules and Iole in a context of nature and freedom far removed from the constraints, dictates and political tensions embodied by Jolco. Günsberg states that, in *Hercules*, ‘licit domesticated heterosexuality provides a framework

³⁰⁴ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual pleasure and narrative cinema’, *Screen. The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992, pp.22-34) p.27

for sexual desire...however, this framework is tokenistic and sketchy.’³⁰⁵ I would argue further that the framework is shown as unsustainable. Far from resolving the Hercules-Iole relationship in orthodox heterosexual terms, the film works to dismantle it over the next sixty minutes’ running time. The split between the characters is reaffirmed on several levels, notably during a scene set in front of a fountain. This sequence opens with a long shot of the fountain, flanked by two stone pillars. Iole runs into the background of the shot, from right to left, followed by Hercules, who remains on the right of the frame in medium long shot. Placed on opposite sides of the fountain, Iole and Hercules are separated further by their respective sizes in the shot. The framing and composition of the shot, Iole keeping her back to Hercules, convey a sense of distance and isolation.

In the final scene, Hercules reclaims his place in the heterosexual, domesticised union with Iole that was established in the early part of the film. This conventional resolution is contradicted and subverted by the *mise-en-scène*. Placed in the centre of the frame, the reunited couple look off to the right, not at one another. On visual terms, at least, neither functions as the object of the other’s desire. Positioned behind Iole, Hercules places his hands on her shoulders, a minimal physical contact that stands in marked contrast to their earlier embrace and kiss. The scene is staged in semi-shadow, leaving the actors’ facial expressions obscured. While Iole turns her head to look at Hercules, she quickly looks away again to the right of the frame. Gazing in the same direction, rather than at each other, Hercules and Iole look beyond the diegetic space for a resolution of their relationship that the film itself is unable to provide.

The secondary female characters are similarly problematic in relation to the film’s construction of masculinity. The sequence with the Amazons is of special interest in that it offers an overt challenge to the representation of dominant masculinity and patriarchy. On a narrative level, this challenge is dissipated and marginalised through the intervention of Hercules. In other respects, the rupture of patriarchy embodied by the female-dominated Amazon society remains unresolved and uncontainable. The Amazons’ characteristics suggest that masculinity, far from being a fixed, unchanging essence, is an acquired or

³⁰⁵ Günsberg, 2005, p.107

performed quality that is not gender-specific. Their armour and weaponry are associated with male aggression, militarism and conflict. It could be argued that the Amazons reflect 1950s debates about the new, economically-empowered woman asserting her place in the urban-centred, technologically-driven labour market, while unskilled male workers were increasingly marginalised. While direct links of this kind are problematic, it is notable that *Hercules* foregrounds the Amazons in a lengthy (twenty-three-minute), self-contained sequence where Jason and his followers assume the passivity and helplessness previously associated with femininity. The Amazons' first appearance is framed in long shot, the female warriors emerging from background foliage to ambush and surround Jason and his friends. Rather than compete on equal terms—a 'fair fight'—the Amazons exploit a landscape familiar to them but unfamiliar to the Argonauts to secure an advantage.

The gynosexuality represented by the Amazons is also associated with illicit heterosexuality, to borrow Günsberg's term,³⁰⁶ the non-domestic, non-procreational sexual desire that cannot be permitted by a patriarchal society as it disturbs the established gender hierarchy. A woman whose sexuality is dictated by appetite rather than the constraints of maternity and family is a potentially threatening figure. In *Hercules*, this threat is marked explicitly as lethal. Hercules, Orpheus and Ulysses literally carry their fellow Argonauts away from the embrace of women (*fig. 10*). Hercules is weighed down with four male bodies, reclaimed from female desire and death to resume their place in the homosocial order. Untainted by sexual contact with the Amazons, Hercules retains his masculine potency, while the Argonauts he rescues are limp, unconscious and oblivious to the dangers of gynosexuality.

³⁰⁶ Günsberg, 2005, p.120

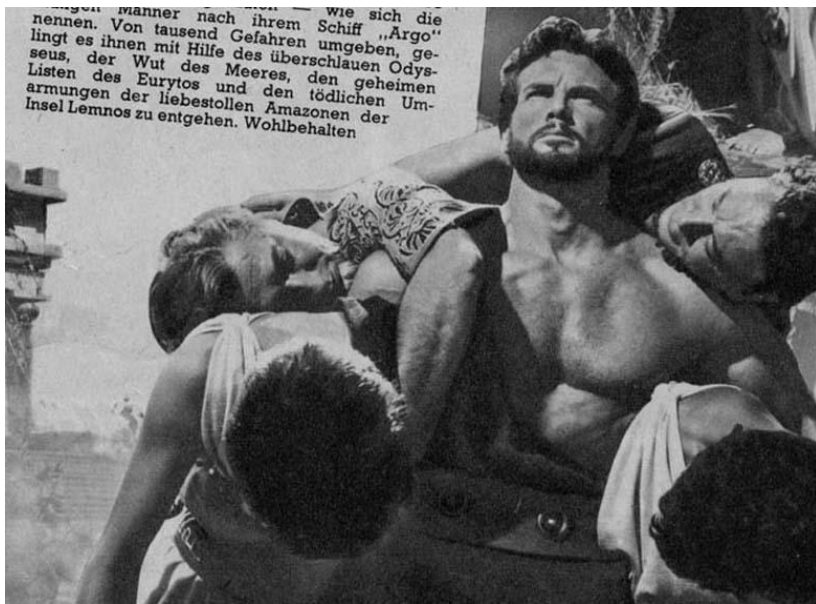


Fig.10 *Hercules*

It is notable that Hercules is largely absent from the Amazon sequences. His exclusion from this matriarchal society is, arguably, a further rupture in the film's representation of heroic masculinity. The companions of Hercules represent ordinary masculinity, which may be challenged and temporarily matched by the Amazons. Hercules' super-masculinity cannot be shown to be vulnerable in the same way. In the sequel, *Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959), the hero is bewitched by the Queen of Lydia (Sylvia Lopez), who erases all memories of his identity and past life. This amnesia legitimises Hercules' capitulation to illicit, non-domestic, recreational sexual desire. In *Hercules*, his unacknowledged impotence against the Amazons takes a less overt form. He may disrupt their society to rescue his fellow Argonauts, but he cannot transform this matriarchy into a patriarchal society, nor can he conquer or destroy it. The Argonauts sail away from the island of the Amazons with the latter's social, gender and hierarchical structures still intact and unchallenged. In Greco-Roman myth, Hercules does not hesitate to slay the Amazon queen Hippolyta when he believes she has betrayed him.³⁰⁷ In *Hercules*, to engage in combat with the Amazons would be to acknowledge their status as a threat. Furthermore, this threat can only be dealt with through physical violence, underlining both its 'masculine' nature and its subversion of patriarchal constructions of masculinity and femininity. On another level, for Hercules to fight with a woman would undermine his heroic masculinity. The film's

³⁰⁷ Thomas Bulfinch, *Myths of Greece and Rome* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984) p.169

first scene establishes that women are to be protected and desired. Hercules' legitimate opponents are savage beasts and hostile men. The Amazons destabilise and confuse these categories, another potential threat that is resolved only by excluding Hercules from their society, with no point of engagement. I will argue that Hercules' position as outsider extends beyond the society of the Amazons. Furthermore, his status as outsider or 'other' is a key factor in fragmenting the film's depiction of heroic masculinity.

Hercules excluded

Hercules establishes its title character as an emblem of benevolent patriarchal authority. This status is shown to be irreconcilable with the construction of heroic masculinity. The attributes that render Hercules 'heroic' are the same qualities that cannot be incorporated into a patriarchal hierarchy. Hercules is named—and names himself—as 'Hercules of Thebes', ostensibly tying the character to a specific geographical location, point of origin and established social order. While Hercules is of Thebes, he does not belong to Thebes, which serves only as a neutral reference point. Hercules is associated initially with the natural landscape, such as the cliff and coast outside Jolco, rather than the artificial 'cityscape' built and occupied by mortal men. He exists outside this social and domestic order, both figuratively and literally. At the same time, Hercules is depicted as disturbing the natural order, his presence first signified by the uprooted tree. As a 'super-human' who transcends the laws of nature and cannot be assimilated or contained by the constructs of civilisation, Hercules is a potentially threatening figure.

Hercules' status as both hero and outsider is underlined by comparison with the other male characters. The masculinity of the villains is marked as inadequate compared to that of Hercules, a representation that seems both logical and unproblematic. The representation of Hercules' allies is more troubling. Characters such as Jason embody the film's structuring norm of 'ordinary' masculinity, by which Hercules' super human strength can be assessed and appreciated. Though depicted as brave warriors and skilled athletes, they

remain relatively powerless compared to Hercules, whose feats of strength create a sense of uneasiness, signified by an eerie electronic tone. Ellis Cashmore argues that, for the Ancient Greeks, ‘Athletic excellence achieved in competition was an accomplishment of, literally, heroic proportions.’³⁰⁸ To train, discipline and hone the body in pursuit of sporting excellence was to emulate the heroes of classical myth. In *Hercules*, there is a clear distinction between the achievements of mortal men and those of the demigod. The scene where Hercules throws the discus with supernatural force is of particular interest from this perspective. A low-angle medium long shot frames Hercules looking off to the right, holding the discus in his right hand, stretching and bending his arm in readiness for the throw. This ‘heroic’ image is intercut with medium shots of Iphitus, clearly jealous, and Iole, clearly admiring, returning to Hercules as he lets loose the discus. The vanishing discus is seen in long shot, followed by a long shot of more neutral onlookers, a medium shot of the astonished Iphitus, a long shot of the discus as it disappears from view and a medium shot of the now fearful Iphitus. Even Ulysses’ look of admiration and wonder turns to fear. Hercules’ super-natural strength marks him as unacceptably ‘different’. After the death of Iphitus, Hercules is left standing alone on the palace steps, a long shot emphasising his isolation.

The scene where Hercules renounces his immortality is an attempt to recode the character’s status, enabling incorporation into the prevailing social structure that was previously impossible. This strategy for restabilising Hercules as the prime signifier of traditional patriarchal values is itself inherently unstable. His new mortality has negligible effect on his representation, despite being written on his body in the form of bloody wounds left by the Cretan Bull’s horns. The quest for the Golden Fleece is another strategy for incorporating and regulating Hercules’ super-masculinity in an organised social structure. Hercules joins the all-male crew of *The Argo*, endorsing their mission and erasing his former marginalisation and exclusion. Once again, this reconstruction of Hercules is unsustainable. Günsberg characterises homosociality—the relations between men—as ‘the powerful and fundamental dynamic...on which patriarchy is founded’.³⁰⁹ Yet the Argonauts’ all-male group is shown to be unstable, ruptured easily by guile and sabotage, held together only through the superhuman strength of Hercules, whose

³⁰⁸ Cashmore, 2000, pp.63-64

³⁰⁹ Günsberg, 2005, p.108

patriarchal authority is depicted in terms of brute aggression. He wields a huge phallic club, which identifies him in classical statuary, along with the lion skin, and threatens to use it even on his friend Jason when the latter demands to be reunited with Antea. A long shot places Jason and his fellow dissenters on the left of the frame, while Hercules is on the extreme right, standing on a higher level of the ship, his right arm leaning on the club. This composition separates Hercules from his companions and places him above them. I would argue that this image encapsulates his representation throughout the entire film, superior to other men and isolated from them by this superiority. At a crucial point in the narrative, the recovery of the Golden Fleece, Hercules' extraordinary masculinity must be subordinate to the 'orthodox', socially containable masculinity embodied by Jason. Furthermore, the patriarchy represented by Jason does not require the heroic masculinity of Hercules nor can it accommodate his difference and potential threat.

In the end, *Hercules* fails to resolve or even contain its problematic representations of masculinity. The latent eroticism of the displayed super-torso is not repressed, displaced or legitimised through violence or spectacular action, nor through contrast with the constructions of femininity. Hercules is not a viable figurehead for homosociality, resisting any incorporation into a sustainable social hierarchy.

Hercules Divided

Duel of the Titans is relevant to my argument for several reasons, in terms of historical-industrial context, reception studies and textual analysis. It was produced at the mid-point of Steve Reeves' career in Italy, also around halfway through the lifespan of the *peplum* genre as a whole. Having played Hercules in two films, Reeves took the part of Romulus, a hero associated exclusively with Roman myth and, alongside Remus, a figure both familiar and specific to Italian culture. The film's Italian title is *Romolo e Remo* and both names were still in use as first or Christian names when the film was made. By coincidence, the crew for the film included key grip Romolo Romagnoli and gaffer Remo Dolci, though

their consecutive billing on the Italian credits was probably not by chance. *Duel of the Titans* also marked the first pairing of two muscle-bound heroes in a *peplum* film, Gordon Scott co-starring as Remus. The casting of Americans as heroes associated strongly with Italy and its mythical past in an Italian production does not appear to have caused significant local debate or controversy, judging from contemporary reviews. From this perspective, the reviewer for the British *Monthly Film Bulletin* missed the point when they argued, ‘Steve Reeves and Gordon Scott are charmingly, incongruously all-American as the noble Romulus and the intractable Remus.’³¹⁰ By the early 1960s, *peplum* stars were expected to be American, even if they were in fact British bodybuilders or Italians working under Anglicised pseudonyms.

The relationship between Romulus and Remus, twin brothers and demigods, has a number of implications for the concept of heroic masculinity as constructed by *Hercules*. It should be noted that the strategy of bifurcation employed by *Duel of the Titans* is by no means definitive or unproblematic, being dependent on the elimination of Remus. Nevertheless, the film’s construction of heroic masculinity evolves into a sustainable form that can contain such potentially troubling issues as male potency, gender difference and perfection as threat. In *Hercules*, the titular hero has no definable position in Jolco’s patriarchal hierarchy, despite his crucial role in placing Jason on the throne. In *Duel of the Titans*, the reactionary patriarchal status quo is overcome, destroyed and replaced by a new benevolent patriarchy with Romulus as its figurehead. The threatening, uncontrollable aspects of the *peplum* hero are embodied by Remus. As the marginalised ‘other’, he cannot be reconciled with the social, hierarchical and gender orthodoxies endorsed by his brother. Refusing to be assimilated into the new order, Remus must be eliminated, leading to Romulus’ reluctant fratricide.

The film’s plot can be summarised as follows: Romulus (Steve Reeves) and Remus (Gordon Scott) are the twin sons of Rhea Silvia (Laura Solari) and the god Mars, nurtured by a she-wolf and raised by the shepherd Faustolo (Andrea Bosis). Stealing horses from the tyrant king Amulius (Franco Volpi), Romulus is attracted to Julia (Virna Lisi),

³¹⁰ *MFB* Vol XXX Nos. 348-359, 1963, p.89

daughter of Tadius (Massimo Girotti), King of the Sabines, and claims her for himself. Taken captive, Romulus is sentenced to die in the arena yet emerges triumphant. Having learned of his divine heritage, Remus attacks Amulio's forces and destroys his city. Romulus and Remus lead their people on a trek to a new home, in a valley surrounded by seven hills. En route, the brothers quarrel and go their separate ways. Romulus's group arrives safely in the valley, where they defeat Tadius' army. Remus reappears and challenges Romulus to single combat. Romulus is the victor and the city of Rome is founded.

The US press book for *Duel of the Titans* suggests an unqualified endorsement of male physical strength and potency: 'The film gives Steve [Reeves] an opportunity to display his magnificent physique as he fights, rides and wrestles to victory in the action-filled adventure thriller.'³¹¹ I will argue that the film itself represents heroic masculinity as a process of gradual evolution rather than a fixed, pre-existing essence.

Evolving masculinities

On the most obvious level, *Duel of the Titans* is unusual for the *peplum* genre in stressing the vulnerability of its heroes. In *Hercules*, the title character appears as a fully formed heroic figure of established legendary status. Romulus and Remus are first seen as newborn infants, emphasising their helplessness and dependency on maternal protection, whether human or lupine. A medium shot frames the brothers wrapped in a blanket, only their hands and faces visible, with no sign of the bodies that will become super-torsos. The familiar classical image of the infant Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf is not recreated for the film, though they are seen in her lair, alongside several wolf pups.

³¹¹ *Duel of the Titans*, Paramount Press Book and Merchandising Manual (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1963) p.4

Romulus and Remus' flawed masculinity renders them powerless and under threat on several occasions. For the first third of the film, Romulus is associated with images of entrapment and helplessness as much as freedom and action. In the most extreme scene of physical punishment, he is spun around on a wooden platform and whipped a dozen times, leaving large welts on his torso. Medium shots of Romulus, his arms outstretched, evoke an image of crucifixion and Christian martyrdom, with no show of pain, though his expression is stoical rather than beatific (*fig.11*). Remus is powerless before an erupting volcano and his resulting injuries render him as passive and helpless as his infant self, dependent once more on female nurturing (*fig.12*). Throughout *Duel of the Titans*, the brothers' male potency is represented in terms of qualification and restriction. It is within these limitations that their respective masculinities evolve. In foregrounding both the strengths and weaknesses of Romulus and Remus, *Duel of the Titans* openly acknowledges their flawed masculinities. *Hercules* is unable to sustain its construction of perfect masculinity; *Duel of the Titans* represents this imperfection as a given.



Fig.11 *Duel of the Titans*



Fig.12 *Duel of the Titans*

The casting of Gordon Scott as Remus is especially important with regard to the film's construction of evolving and competing masculinities. A friend of Reeves and a fellow bodybuilder, Scott had replaced Lex Barker as the film incarnation of Tarzan in *Tarzan's Hidden Jungle* (Harold Schuster, 1955), making six appearances as the character.³¹² Scott's Tarzan films proved popular both in the US and overseas, playing in such key European markets as the UK, West Germany, France, Spain and Italy. Discussing the earlier Tarzan films starring Johnny Weissmuller, Morton argues that they foreground the exposed male body as the primary object of display and spectacle.³¹³ While this downplays the other forms of exotic spectacle offered by these films, such as the jungle settings, wild animals and 'savage' natives, I would concur that the emphasis on Tarzan—and therefore his body—is a consistent feature of the cycle. In *Tarzan's Greatest Adventure* (John Guillermin, 1959), Scott's Tarzan rescues a young woman, Angie (Sara Shane), from a crocodile. He is then placed in medium shot on the left of the frame, facing the fully clad

³¹² Despite Scott's success as Tarzan, Reeves was the bigger box-office draw thanks to *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*. Reeves' contract for *Duel of the Titans* gave him star billing above the title, with Scott second billed.

³¹³ Morton, 1993, p.114

Angie. His muscular torso drips water, the shot dominated by Scott's physique. Scott was established internationally as an action star whose body was on constant display for a predominantly male juvenile audience. As with the *peplum* genre, the Tarzan films provided a legitimate, culturally sanctioned context for the public display of the near-naked male body, clad only in a loincloth. In this respect, the transition from Tarzan to *peplum* hero was no great leap. Scott's association with the Tarzan role established his legitimacy as a *peplum* star on an equal footing to Reeves. Their casting as twin brothers underlined this equality.

Several of Scott's Italian co-stars remarked that he was a 'real' athlete, with a more 'natural' physique than the average bodybuilder *peplum* star.³¹⁴ There is a case for arguing that Scott's bodybuilding enhanced his already powerful physique rather than replacing his natural build with an artificially pumped-up musculature. This quality had already been noted during Scott's tenure as Tarzan. Reviewing *Tarzan's Fight for Life* (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1958), *Variety* commented, 'Gordon Scott makes the athletic stunts believable and possible.'³¹⁵ The spectacle and pleasure of a stunt were enhanced by a performer whose physical appearance and abilities made the action more plausible. From this perspective, Scott was not only Reeves' equal but also threatened his position as the leading *peplum* star. The US promotional material for *Duel of the Titans* claimed Scott was two inches taller than Reeves,³¹⁶ implying he was more than a match for the screen Hercules. This undercurrent provided a further sub-textual level to the growing competition and rivalry between Romulus and Remus. The film's English title also emphasises the size and strength of the main characters³¹⁷ and their climactic confrontation. The US artwork highlights these elements, showing the heavily muscled Romulus and Remus in mid-battle (*fig. 13*). While Romulus lacks a conventional weapon, he looks both determined and confident, his body moving as a single harmonious unit. Remus is heavily armed yet his face conveys strain and his stance is awkward. For audiences of the time, the first point of contact with the film would often have been the

³¹⁴ Mimmo Palmara claimed 'Gordon Scott was the only real athlete...He really had an exceptional physique, natural', while Rosalba Neri felt Scott had 'a different body type, more long-limbed but very powerful' (Della Casa, 2006).

³¹⁵ Source: variety.com

³¹⁶ Press book, 1963, p.5

³¹⁷ A tactic also employed for *Goliath and the Barbarians* and *The Giant of Marathon*. In neither case are these qualities evoked by the Italian titles, 'Terror of the Barbarians' and 'The Battle of Marathon'.

promotional material, especially the posters. *Duel of the Titans* was sold as the confrontation of two competing super-masculinities which could only be resolved through mortal combat.



Fig.13 *Duel of the Titans* – US promotional artwork

Nurturing femininity

Romulus' evolving masculinity progresses partly through his interaction with the femininity embodied by Julia. To establish a bond with Julia, Romulus' super-masculinity must evolve within certain social constraints, signalling his tacit acceptance of existing conventions. When Romulus carries Julia over the threshold of a hut and places her on a bed of straw, this gesture could be read as a symbolic marriage. Julia is placed on the extreme left of the CinemaScope frame, in long shot, with Romulus on the extreme right, in medium shot, echoing the staging of the fountain scene in *Hercules*. In *Duel of the*

Titans, this distance between the characters will gradually diminish. Up to this point, around twenty-eight minutes into the film, the adult Romulus' torso has been covered by his tunic, a strategy of concealment at variance with most *peplum* films. He now removes and wrings out his rain-soaked top, displaying his torso and flexed muscle for both Julia and the extra-diegetic spectator. Having objectified Julia during their first encounter, he offers her the same privileged position with himself as the object. Romulus remains bare-chested for the dungeon, arena and uprising scenes, though not by choice. Once Amulius' city is fallen, he is reunited with Julia, both the first and last character for whom he willingly displays his body. After these sequences, his torso is covered for the rest of the film.

Duel of the Titans gives the evolving relationship between Romulus and Julia a sense of equality absent from many *peplum* couplings. On a narrative level, Romulus' dalliance with Julia leads to his capture at sword and spear-point, a clear manifestation of masculine vulnerability and imperfection (*fig. 14*). Only Julia's intervention saves him from death, her privileged position in the existing social hierarchy more potent than Romulus' physical strength and determination. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, Julia's fair hair and dark costume complement Romulus' dark hair and light-coloured costume (*fig. 15*), a harmonious *yin yang* effect that avoids the more direct matching of appearance initially associated with Romulus and Remus. Denied a maternal bond, Romulus reconnects to the feminine via his relationship with Julia. It could be argued that Julia's representation reflects the new generation of economically and socially empowered women that arose during the 1950s and, furthermore, their eventual acceptance by men as an ally rather than a rival or enemy. While I am wary of such a specific reading of the character, her very presence in *Duel of the Titans* hints at a possible wider cultural shift in male attitudes. Hercules seems both compromised and diminished by his heterosexual attachment to Iole, denied the opportunity to give his masculinity its fullest expression. Romulus' bond with Julia is, to use Günsberg's terms, a licit, domesticated, procreational coupling that enhances rather than weakens the hero's masculine strength. In the next section, I will argue that the masculine strength embodied by Romulus is also a contained masculinity that both requires and thrives within a specific social framework.



Fig.14 *Duel of the Titans*



Fig.15 *Duel of the Titans*

Contained masculinity

In *Hercules*, the title character's heroic masculinity is fully formed at the outset of the narrative and cannot be contained by any social, political or ideological orthodoxy. The film's attempt to represent this masculinity as an unproblematic validation of male strength and conservative patriarchy is therefore unsustainable. The perfection embodied by Hercules is in itself a threat to the established order. Where Hercules seems more or less invulnerable, Romulus falls short of this perfection, both vulnerable and threatened. Unlike Hercules, he is dependent on the assistance of others for both success and survival. While Romulus evolves into a masculine ideal, his ultimate triumph requires a level of co-operation and collaboration that transcends gender, generation, class, nation and even species. The 'manliness' embodied by Romulus is not self-sufficient, nor can it thrive independently of a wider social or political framework. The potential threat represented by Hercules is present not in Romulus but in Remus. Told the truth of his origins, 'You're the son of a god', his heroic persona is reconfigured: 'I've known it for a long time. Something different flows in my veins; something superior to the others.' Unlike Romulus and other *peplum* heroes, Remus articulates his difference from *and* superiority to ordinary men. Remus' representation of masculinity is reduced to ruthless, self-serving aggression. Romulus gains the wider socio-political-gender perspective necessary for a democratic patriarch. He declares himself king, framed in a low-angle medium close-up, dressed in white, a symbol of purity, against a backdrop of blue sky that suggests freedom and good fortune. He ploughs the first furrow of the new city with two white oxen, a symbolic expression of renewal and foundation. Having accepted his responsibilities to Julia and the wider community, Romulus must distance himself from Remus.

The divergence between Romulus and Remus is reflected in their costumes. Initially, they wear complementary tunics of simple cloth, Romulus dressed in brown-purple, Remus in dark red. For the first major action set-piece, both brothers wear the short skirt favoured by the *peplum* hero, united in their struggle against oppression. Once Remus has asserted his leadership, he favours a black, shoulder-revealing tunic and green cloak, while Romulus wears a torso-covering buff tunic with crude stitching (*fig.16*). The covering of Romulus' body suggests a degree of civilisation and domestication. The relative simplicity of the

garment signifies that Romulus, though a leader and warrior, remains a man of the people and for the people, eschewing the finery associated with the ruling classes. Remus' bare shoulder reveals his strength and aggression, while the cloak underlines his aspirations for the trappings of wealth and power, rising above the common people.

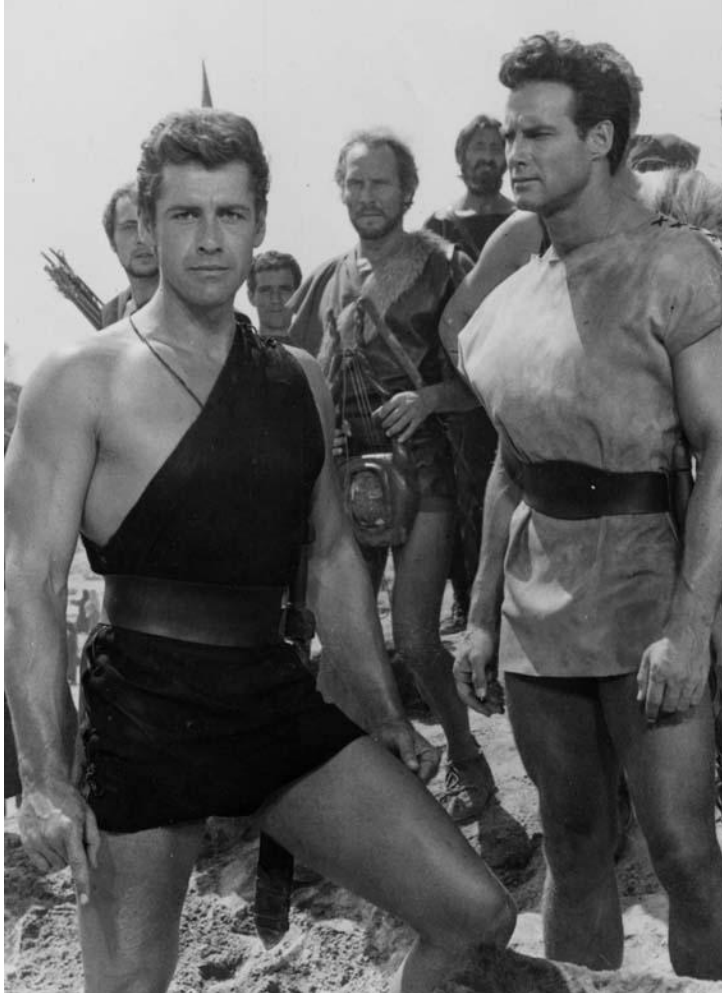


Fig.16 *Duel of the Titans*

The framing and composition of key shots underline this sense of gradual distancing. Early on in the film, the brothers are framed opposite Julia with the screen bisected by a wooden post. Julia stands to the left of the post, dressed in white, with the brothers to the right, in dark tunics, the semi-shadowed Remus merging with Romulus (*fig.17*). The film's main embodiment of femininity stands apart from the as-yet indistinct representations of super-masculinity. After the defeat of Amulius, the brothers are framed in medium close-up either side of their dying mother. While this arrangement of the figures could suggest

unity, alongside grief, Rhea Silvia favours Romulus with her look. After the brothers have agreed to compete for the leadership of their people, Remus is placed on the extreme left of the frame, in close-up, while Romulus and Julia stand together in long shot to the centre right. Favoured by the gods, Romulus is proclaimed leader, only for Remus to reject this divine verdict. The brothers are positioned in medium close-up at extreme ends of the frame, Romulus on the left side, Remus on the right, their followers in the distant background. Despite this positioning, it is Romulus, on a figurative level, who is truly on the side of right. Whereas Romulus and Julia are brought together in harmony, the brothers will embrace one final time only in death, their bodies brought together as Romulus impales Remus on his sword. The dying Remus is placed in medium close-up on the left of the frame, with Romulus in the centre, also in medium close-up, while Julia walks into long shot from the right, poised to take her place by Romulus' side as he is separated forever from his brother (*fig.18*).



Fig.17 *Duel of the Titans*



Fig.18 *Duel of the Titans*

The final image of *Duel of the Titans* is an overhead long shot of the victorious Romulus and the slain Remus. They are surrounded by Romulus' followers, against the backdrop of the land on which Rome will be built. The focus thus shifts from the individual, the triumphant yet saddened Romulus, to the group, the leader merged with his people. Remus, the manifestation of the threatening, uncontainable 'other', has been eradicated. Nature will be transformed harmoniously into a new civilisation. Male potency, as represented by Romulus, is incorporated into the evolving social structure, underlined by his culturally sanctioned union with Julia, which itself bridges the gender divide that proved irreconcilable in *Hercules*. *Duel of the Titans* constructs a dual representation of the *peplum* hero, resolving his inherent contradictions through a binary reapportioning of his attributes. Convinced of his 'natural' superiority, Remus becomes an aggressive, disruptive, uncontrollable force representing selfish ambition. From this perspective, his death is a necessary step in the foundation of a sustainable and benevolent patriarchy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the construction of heroic masculinity in *Hercules* and *Duel of the Titans* and argued that this representation is inherently problematic and prone to rupture. Outlining the contexts in which *Hercules* was made and the forms of masculinity available at the time, I suggested that its part-origins in 1950s debates on masculinity, including the body culture that supplied the film's star, contributed to this instability. Highlighting the exposed male body, the film is unable to repress, displace or legitimise the eroticism associated with this display. The construction of femininity, far from endorsing a conservative representation of masculinity, contributes further to the latter's disintegration. *Hercules* presents the classical hero as a figurehead for male physical strength and, by extension, a reactionary patriarchal status quo, yet the means by which it achieves this representation render it unsustainable. As a counter-discourse to *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* offers a potential resolution of debates raised in the earlier film, constructing a viable, evolving masculinity. However, its emphasis on male vulnerability and dependence could not be easily reconciled with the dominant narrative, thematic and ideological requirements of the wider *peplum* genre. Produced three years after *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* proved a commercial success³¹⁸ but had little obvious influence on subsequent *pepla*,³¹⁹ which adhered largely to the *Hercules* formula that—on the surface—valorised masculine potency, perfection and independence. My next chapter will explore an alternative depiction of Herculean masculinity in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Chaffey, 1963), an American-produced film made partly in response to the international success of the *peplum* cycle. My focus will be on the ways in which the representation of heroic masculinity is transformed by emulation and differentiation, reflecting contemporary debates on masculinity within the United States.

³¹⁸ *Duel of the Titans* opened in Italy on 6 December 1961. The film made 704,713,709 lire at the domestic box-office, compared to *Hercules*' 887,384,717 lire. Of the twelve Steve Reeves films released between 1958 and 1962, it was the seventh most successful in Italy. Source: Gianni Rondolino (ed.), *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965* (Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore, 1979) pp.134 and 192.

³¹⁹ The concept of competing super-masculinities was reused in only a handful of films, including *Ulisse contro Ercole* (*Ulysses against Hercules*, Mario Caiano, 1962), *Ercole sfida Sansone* (*Hercules, Samson and Ulysses*, Francisci, 1963) and *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus: gli invincibili* (*Samson and the Mighty Challenge*, Giorgio Capitani, 1964). This doubling or quadrupling of muscular heroes was one strategy employed by producers to lure audiences as the *peplum* genre declined in popularity. In all three cases, the competing masculinities progress through initial rivalry or enmity to ultimate alliance, reversing the premise of *Duel of the Titans*.

Chapter Three

Hercules Diminished: Emulation, Differentiation and Inversion in *Jason and the Argonauts*

In the previous chapter, I examined the representation of masculinity in *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958) and *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961). I argued that the former endorses male potency and self-sufficiency in a form that is problematic and ultimately unsustainable, while the latter proposes a viable, evolving masculinity marked by vulnerability and dependence. I stated further that the super-masculinity of *Hercules* prevailed in the majority of *pepla*, which required a seemingly uncomplicated valorisation of male strength and physical perfection. I shall now explore an alternative depiction of Herculean masculinity in the American-produced film *Jason and the Argonauts* (Chaffey, 1963). This was made, I will argue, partly in response to the international success of *Hercules*, its sequel *Hercules Unchained* and the *peplum* cycle as a whole. I suggest the film exhibits a conscious, strategic and acknowledged reaction to the depiction of Hercules in the 1958 film. My focus is on the ways in which *Jason and the Argonauts*—and its associated national, industrial, cultural and generic contexts—transformed the standard *peplum* representation of heroic masculinity through emulation, differentiation and inversion to reflect broader debates on masculinity in America, cinematic and extra-cinematic, during the early 1960s.

The figure of Hercules is central to my analysis, even though he does not feature in *Jason and the Argonauts* as the main character. I argue that his diminished role—on several levels—is significant to his representation in terms of heroic masculinity. *Jason and the Argonauts* strips Hercules of his super-masculinity and positions him in the ranks of flawed mortals. His depiction in the film also suggests his associated heroic manliness is superseded by a new masculinity in the form of Jason and, furthermore, that unreconstructed Herculean masculinity is unsustainable in a changing environment. I will

place my discussion of the film in a wider social and political context, centred on the intellectual yet virile and above all youthful masculinity championed and promoted by United States President John F. Kennedy. I argue that *Jason and the Argonauts* plays upon ideas of competing and evolving masculinities that intersect, to whatever degree, with the liberal ‘Cold Warrior’ embodied by Kennedy. I also suggest the masculinity endorsed by *Jason and the Argonauts* did not achieve the same resonance with 1960s audiences in North America as alternative Kennedy-related screen masculinities in films such as *Ocean’s Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960) and *Sergeants 3* (John Sturges, 1962), proposing some reasons why this is the case.

Jason and the Argonauts is linked to the Italian-produced *peplum* films on various levels: chronological, thematic, industrial and economic. It was financed and distributed by Hollywood major Columbia Pictures and filmed in 1961, the mid-point of the *peplum* cycle and shortly after the US release of *Hercules Unchained* in 1960. It seems both logical and reasonable that American producers would exploit an internationally popular genre with proven local audience appeal.³²⁰ Yet it is notable that very few American-produced films imitated or drew upon the *peplum* genre, despite the considerable US box-office success of *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*. Columbia also financed and distributed the comedy *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* (Edward Bernds, 1962), which offers a depiction of Herculean masculinity, in parodic form, markedly less radical than that found in *Jason and the Argonauts*. The low-budget *Atlas* (Roger Corman, 1961) is discussed briefly below, yet this, like the Columbia releases, was the exception rather than the rule.

Most American film companies, both major and minor, preferred to buy the US distribution rights to existing Italian-produced *pepla* rather than invest in new projects. This practice had two clear advantages. Firstly, the theatrical rights to *pepla* involved a relatively small financial outlay with minimal risk and the chance of a significant profit in relation to cost. Secondly, the *pepla* were usually finished products with a pre-existing English soundtrack prepared in Italy. While some *pepla* were felt to require reediting,

³²⁰ The success of the later Italian western cycle prompted a number of American-financed imitations, such as *Hang ‘Em High* (Ted Post, 1968), *Barquero* (Gordon Douglas, 1970) and *El Condor* (John Guillermin, 1970). Of course, the Italian western drew heavily on the American western, while the *peplum* related only tangentially to the Hollywood classical epic, with which it co-existed during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

rescoring and occasional redubbing prior to US distribution, they were by and large ready for release in a relatively short period of time. A new project, by contrast, entailed a not insignificant period of gestation—through initial pitches to post-production—with no guarantee that the *peplum* or sword-and-sandal genre would still be popular by the time the film was ready for release. The lengthy production period for *Jason and the Argonauts* meant it appeared nearly three years after *Hercules Unchained*. While this is an exceptional example, it is reasonable to surmise that most US distributors took a more short-term view of the cycle.

I suggest, therefore, that Columbia Pictures' decision to back *Jason and the Argonauts*—and *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*—involved factors not related directly to the popularity of the *pepla*. The studio had ongoing business relationships with the key personnel involved with these films, which were, in effect, independent productions financed and distributed by Columbia. In both cases, it is these relationships combined with the commercial value of the Hercules brand-name and the wider *peplum* genre that made production of the films both desirable and economically viable. I would argue further in the case of *Jason and the Argonauts* that this combination of factors shaped the overall style of the film—in both form and content—and especially the depiction of Hercules and associated notions of super-masculinity.

Re-launching the Argo

Unlike *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, which is a comedy, the fantasy-adventure *Jason and the Argonauts* has been characterised as both part of the *peplum* cycle and a direct imitation of the genre. Writing in 1963 for the British publication *Films and Filming*, critic Allen Eyles stated, 'it [*Jason and the Argonauts*] lacks the visual flair and sweeping scale of the best in this genre',³²¹ the implication—or assumption—being that *Jason and the Argonauts* was a genre film of a piece with *Hercules* and its successors. While Eyles's

³²¹ Eyles, *Films and Filming*, October 1963, p.26

review may not be representative of the international or even British critical response, it is notable that at least some reviews saw little or no reason to differentiate *Jason and the Argonauts* from its supposed Italian counterparts. In terms of the film's North American reception, Danny Peary states, 'the typical review lumped the picture with the numerous inferior Italian-made epics that flooded the country after the success of *Hercules*',³²² though he does not give any relevant examples.³²³ It seems that, for at least some critics, the subject matter and timing imposed an automatic *peplum* status on *Jason and the Argonauts* which did not require further explanation or debate. This view continued to have currency years after the film's initial release. Discussing 1960s British cinema, Robert Murphy characterises *Jason and the Argonauts* as an 'excellent imitation Italian epic'.³²⁴ While the term 'imitation' often has negative connotations in terms of film production, Murphy's reference suggests *Jason and the Argonauts* both equalled and surpassed the more 'authentic' Italian epics of the era in its referencing of *peplum* characteristics. As discussed below, this categorisation of the film is at odds with the stated intentions of its creators.

In terms of its Italian promotion and distribution, *Jason and the Argonauts* does appear to have merged—however unintentionally—with the contemporaneous *peplum* cycle. Local audiences were well accustomed to watching mythological action films with American—or apparently American—stars and the film was dubbed in Italian, erasing any trace of linguistic disjuncture. The film's Italian title, *Gli Argonauti* ('The Argonauts') is also the local subtitle for *I giganti della Tessaglia* (*Giants of Thessaly*, Riccardo Freda, 1960), risking potential confusion with the earlier Italian-produced film. Jason, or Giasone, was a recurring figure in the *pepla*, serving as a supporting character in *Hercules* and the hero of *Giants of Thessaly*, though without attaining a prominence or popularity comparable to that of Hercules or Maciste. *Jason and the Argonauts* could also be incorporated into a minor

³²² Peary, *Cult Movies* (London: Vermilion, 1982) p.168

³²³ The *New York Times* review implied rather than stated that the film belonged to the *peplum* or sword-and-sandal genre: 'This absurd, unwieldy adventure — if that's the word—is no worse, but certainly no better, than most of its kind.' Cited generic ingredients include 'mythological footnotes, monsters, magic and carefully exposed limbs and torsos'. The anonymous critic noted how leading man Todd Armstrong, playing Jason, 'seems spindly compared to some "beefcake" predecessors' (*New York Times*, August 8 1963, nytimes.com, accessed 13 September 2011).

³²⁴ Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992) p.312. *Jason and the Argonauts* is sometimes characterised as a British film, due largely to the predominantly British crew and cast, despite its North American producers, finance and leads.

peplum subgenre, featuring an athletic rather than muscle-bound hero who relies on his wits and skill—and occasional help from the gods—rather than brute strength, as seen in *The Giants of Thessaly, Il colosso di Rodi (The Colossus of Rhodes)*, Sergio Leone, 1961) and the semi-parody *Arrivano i Titani* (UK: *Sons of Thunder*, Duccio Tessari, 1962).

The prime movers in the making of *Jason and the Argonauts* were the established American team of producer Charles H. Schneer and special effects technician and associate producer Ray Harryhausen, best known for combining live action with model animation.³²⁵ Harryhausen established his career with a series of modestly-budgeted science-fiction adventure films, shot in black and white and sold largely on the strength of their monsters and aliens.³²⁶ *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (Nathan Juran, 1958) marked a departure from Schneer and Harryhausen's previous work, which featured contemporary narratives with largely urban North American settings. From this point on, their films were often set in exotic foreign lands in the distant, sometimes mythical past. A switch to colour filming heightened the sense of spectacle and the narratives were constructed around a series of set-pieces highlighting Harryhausen's fantastical animated creatures.

Jason and the Argonauts marked a continuation of this production strategy, which, arguably, ran parallel with—and coincidental to—the emergence of the *peplum*. *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* was released the same year as *Hercules* opened in Italy. Unlike *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, which draws on Middle Eastern folklore, *Jason and the Argonauts* has a clear and perhaps inevitable overlap with the *peplum* genre. Schneer pitched the project to Columbia in December 1960, when the success of *Hercules Unchained*, in particular, was still recent history.³²⁷ It derives its narrative from the same Greco-Roman myths as the second half of *Hercules* and the entirety of *Giants of Thessaly*, which, in contrast to the earlier film, omits the figure of Hercules. It was filmed on Italian locations, including

³²⁵ Harryhausen is now regarded as the major creative force behind *Jason and the Argonauts*. At the time, however, his name was little known to audiences. The US press book for the film barely mentions Harryhausen, focussing far more on Schneer.

³²⁶ *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Eugene Lourie, 1953), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (Robert Gordon, 1955), *Earth vs the Flying Saucers* (Fred F. Sears, 1956) and *20 Million Miles to Earth* (Nathan Juran, 1957). Three of these films were financed and distributed by Columbia Pictures and the last of them made through Morningside Productions, a company established by Schneer and Harryhausen.

³²⁷ Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life* (London: Aurum, 2003) p.151

Paestum, in Southern Italy, and Palinuro, south of Naples.³²⁸ Interiors were shot at the modestly sized Palentino Studios in Rome.³²⁹ The production employed a number of Italian personnel, including several associated with the *peplum*, such as art director Antonio Sarzi-Braga, an assistant set designer for *Hercules in the Centre of the Earth* (Bava, 1961), and actor and fight arranger Ferdinando Poggi, who served as the fencing master on *Duel of the Titans*. In terms of subject matter, locations, infrastructure, and, in a few instances, crew members, *Jason and the Argonauts* intersects with the *peplum* on several levels.

Given these factors, it is not surprising that *Jason and the Argonauts* is regarded as imitative of the Italian *peplum*. However, it was not intended to be received as an imitation and certainly does not qualify as pastiche as the term is usually understood. Characterising pastiche as ‘a kind of aesthetic imitation’, Richard Dyer asserts that this form ‘imitates other art in such a way as to make consciousness of this fact central to its meaning and affect’.³³⁰ In order for a pastiche to be appreciated fully, its status as an imitation must be signalled by the producer to an extent that can be recognised, acknowledged and appreciated by the intended audience. Despite the narrative elements in common, and many of the same characters and settings, *Jason and the Argonauts* is not patterned closely on *Hercules*, nor does it assume audience familiarity with the film or the *peplum* genre as a whole. In terms of recorded intentionality, Harryhausen states his interest in the subject matter predated the North American release of *Hercules*³³¹ and, furthermore, that he and Schneer were anxious for *Jason and the Argonauts* not to be associated with the *peplum*.³³² Though commercially successful, the *pepla* were not highly regarded by many critics and it is understandable that Harryhausen and Schneer would not want their relatively expensive production linked with low-budget dubbed imports. The film was intended as a showcase

³²⁸ Ray Harryhausen, *Film Fantasy Scrapbook* (London: Titan Books, 1989) pp.75 & 78

³²⁹ Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, pp.152 and 153. Harryhausen and Schneer filmed parts of *20 Million Miles to Earth* on location in Italy, so their involvement with the Italian film industry predated the release – and indeed the production – of *Hercules* (Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p.152).

³³⁰ Dyer, *Pastiche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) pp.1 and 4

³³¹ ‘The subject brewed in the back of my mind for years before it reached the light of day.’ Source: Harryhausen, 1989, p.73. Elsewhere, however, Harryhausen has stated he first thought of adapting the legend of the Golden Fleece into a film during production on *Mysterious Island* (Cy Endfield, 1961), shot after the US release of *Hercules*. Source: Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, *The Art of Ray Harryhausen* (London: Aurum, 2005) p.102

³³² Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p.174

for Harryhausen's special effects,³³³ not the muscular male body associated with the *peplum* genre in general and *Hercules* in particular, certainly within the United States.

Columbia Pictures' advertising campaign for the film emphasised its status as an original piece of work. The press book cover bears the banner headline, 'Presented on the Screen for the First Time...' ³³⁴ and the sample posters illustrated within all feature a variation on this line, 'For the First Time on the Screen'. Not only did *Jason and the Argonauts* not acknowledge *Hercules*, it also denied that the myth of Jason and the Golden Fleece had previously been retold in a film, eradicating *Hercules* and *Giants of Thessaly* from existence. By contrast, *Atlas*, an American-financed production shot on locations in Greece, could perhaps be characterised as an imitation *peplum*, certainly in terms of its domestic promotion.³³⁵ In the case of *Jason and the Argonauts*, it is relatively easy to identify its differences from the *peplum*, not least the elaborate set-pieces highlighting animated monsters, the largely British cast and the relatively high production values. The published budget of US\$3 million, quoted in the press book,³³⁶ is far higher than the production costs for the average *peplum* film. I will also argue that the figure of Hercules and his representation differ greatly from the Steve Reeves incarnation and suggest some reasons why this is the case.

Hercules re-imagined

In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Pelias (Douglas Wilmer) usurps the kingdom of Thessaly and the infant prince Jason is carried to safety. Years later, the adult Jason (Todd Armstrong)

³³³ Harryhausen states the project was sold to Columbia partly on the strength of a series of drawings depicting the major special effects set-pieces, such as Jason's battle with the hydra and the Argonauts' fight with living skeletons. Source: Harryhausen and Dalton, 2005, p.110

³³⁴ *Jason and the Argonauts* press book (California: Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1963) p.1

³³⁵ Advertising for the film in the trade press includes the line, 'Let Atlas Lift Your Boxoffice to New Heights', an obvious reference to the mythical titan Atlas holding up the world on his shoulders. This emphasis on super-masculinity and physical strength is in keeping with both the *peplum* and its typical US promotion. Advert reprinted in Gideon Nisbet, *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2006) p.12

³³⁶ Press book, 1963, p.15

returns to Thessaly to overthrow Pelias and claim his throne. Keeping his identity secret, Pelias counsels Jason to assert his rightful kingship by recovering the Golden Fleece, a symbol of authority to be found on the island of Colchis, a long and dangerous voyage. Assisted by the goddess Hera (Honor Blackman), Jason finds a ship, the Argo, and recruits his crew from the champion athletes of Greece, including the legendary Hercules (Nigel Green). When the Argonauts land on the Isle of Bronze to obtain provisions, Hercules disobeys Jason's orders to take only food and water. He steals a giant pin from the treasure house of the gods, invoking the wrath of its guardian, Talos. This bronze giant wrecks the Argo and causes the death of Hercules' friend Hylas (John Cairney), though his fate is not witnessed by the other Argonauts. A guilt-ridden Hercules leaves Jason's crew, opting to stay on the island and look for Hylas.³³⁷ Jason and the remaining Argonauts resume their quest, encountering harpies, clashing rocks, the god Triton and the priestess Medea (Nancy Kovack), until they reach Colchis, where Jason slays the hydra,³³⁸ guardian of the Golden Fleece, and claims the latter for himself. Having battled living skeletons, Jason rejoins Medea and the Argonauts for the voyage home.

As the above outline suggests, the depiction of Hercules in *Jason and the Argonauts* is markedly dissimilar from that found in *Hercules* and discussed in Chapter Two. On the most obvious narrative level, the latter film is based around the figure of Hercules, rather than Jason, and chronicles two of his famous labours before his chance encounter with Jason prompts the quest for the Golden Fleece. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Hercules is reconfigured as a supporting character, his scenes occurring over half an hour of the film's running time. He is also depicted as a thief, or at least an amoral opportunist, a radical departure from the irreproachable morality embodied by Hercules in the 1958 film, though not out of keeping with pre-Prodican depictions in Greco-Roman myth and art. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the representation of Hercules in *Jason and the Argonauts* is, in part at least, a conscious reaction to his depiction in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*. Harryhausen has stated that the casting of Nigel Green, a South African-born character actor based in Britain, was a deliberate strategy to avoid

³³⁷ In Greco-Roman myth, Hylas is abducted by nymphs while fetching water. Hercules goes in search of Hylas and the Argo sails without them.

³³⁸ In Greco-Roman myth, the Lernaean Hydra is a many-headed monster slain by Hercules as the second of his Twelve Labours. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, the reattribution of this heroic deed reflects the film's strategy of diminishing Hercules' male potency in favour of the youthful masculinity represented by Jason.

comparison with the *peplum* epics: ‘we wanted to get away from the Italian beefcake the public had expected of him [Hercules].’³³⁹ This characterisation of the *peplum* incarnation of Hercules as ‘Italian beefcake’ is revealing on several levels. Associating this figure with the Italian film industry, which is broadly accurate in terms of production context, obscures its origins in Greek mythology and, moreover, implies it is not intrinsic to other national film industries, especially the American and British ones that respectively supplied the finance and stars and most of the crew and supporting cast for *Jason and the Argonauts*. The term ‘beefcake’ also has pin-up connotations of passivity and sexual display more overt than the bodybuilder tag, suggesting the Italian films were more about pose than action. Yet the *peplum* stars, led by Steve Reeves, were largely American and ‘beefcake’ is an Americanism originating with Hollywood stars such as Victor Mature.

Harryhausen and Schneer had a different conception of Hercules, for which Green was deemed suitable. As Harryhausen puts it, ‘Nigel was perfect as a slightly older and more intelligent hero, who in his ratty old lion skin was both a braggart and compassionate.’³⁴⁰ Green’s Hercules is tall, tanned and muscular but not super-built. Usually seen bare-chested, Hercules lacks the sculpted bodybuilder physique of the Steve Reeves version, an established *peplum* signifier of super-masculinity. In *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, the latter character, played by Canadian bodybuilder Samson Burke, conforms to the standard *peplum* representation of the hero in appearance if not character. Unlike Reeves and his imitators, parodic or otherwise, Green’s Hercules has chest hair, which designates mature masculinity in antiquity. *Peplum* stars underwent regular depilation to remove body hair, a practise carried over from the bodybuilding culture, where the chest, arms and legs were shaved in order to display the shaped physique to best advantage.³⁴¹ No mention is made of Hercules’ demigod status, as recounted in Greco-Roman mythology, and it is implied that he is mortal. Peary argues in *Cult Movies* that ‘Hercules is portrayed as a *man* of believable strength and physical proportions.’³⁴²

³³⁹ Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p.152

³⁴⁰ Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p.152

³⁴¹ It is notable that, up until the late 1950s, Hollywood stars who exposed their torsos for the camera underwent a similar treatment, both to emphasise their manly physiques and because chest hair was felt to be unsightly. The practice continues today, as in the case of *300* star Gerard Butler and his fellow Spartan actors.

³⁴² Peary, 1982, p.168

Hercules performs three feats of exceptional if not super-natural strength in *Jason and the Argonauts*, a notably modest number compared to the numerous exploits seen in *Hercules* and most other *pepla*. His last display of strength is pushing open the door to the treasure house of the gods, slammed shut by unseen forces. He is framed in medium shot (*fig.1*), bracing his back against the door and his left arm against the door frame, a composition that emphasises his determination and effort as much as a spectacular physique. While there is an element of spectacle in the representation of Hercules, it is relatively low-key compared to the 1958 *Hercules* or indeed *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, where a low-angle medium long shot shows the latter lifting a man above his head (*fig.2*), emphasising his size, strength, physique and prowess in combat. The positioning, framing and lighting of Green's body, along with his more regular, non-built physique, is part of a strategy to shift the emphasis from the muscular male body to the special effects that are the film's main selling point. It also suggests that the formerly imposing Herculean physique has been displaced as the film's main site of heroic masculinity, a point I discuss further below.



Fig.1 *Jason and the Argonauts*



Fig.2 *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*

Hercules makes his entrance approximately twenty minutes into the film, heralded by an off-screen announcement that plays over a shot of applauding and cheering spectators. The film then cuts to a medium shot of Hercules, placed in the centre right of the frame (fig.3). Hercules is heralded by Phalerus (Andrew Faulds), a fellow athlete. Positioned in the centre left of the frame, Phalerus invites his fellow spectators—both intra- and extra-diegetic—to recognise, acknowledge and applaud the legendary hero of Greece. Hercules announces himself in the third person, ‘He’s here!’, and raises his arms, further emphasising both his presence and his expectation that this presence will be regarded and acclaimed as an important event. In *Hercules*, the hero signals his presence with a daring act of rescue, for which he expects no acclaim or reward. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Hercules simply announces himself and demands a reaction. He throws the familiar lion skin over his shoulder, underlining his identity and status. Compared to Reeves’ Hercules, this Hercules’ initial display of athleticism and strength—a brief wrestling match—is not particularly remarkable, let alone super-natural. It is his very presence, its proclamation and acknowledgement which evoke and confirm his heroic status during this first appearance. Hercules’ incorporation into the homosocial order that constitutes the *Argonauts* is on the basis of his name and reputation alone. On the other hand, Hercules’ debut in the film also features his first interaction with Jason and the first implication that the former’s heroic status is open to question.



Fig.3 *Jason and the Argonauts*

By the time Hercules makes his first appearance, Jason is established as the film's focal character—implied in the title—and a man of moral purpose and both physical and mental strength. Like Hercules in the 1958 film, the adult Jason is introduced with a heroic act, saving King Pelias from drowning, echoed in a later scene where he rescues Medea from the waters controlled by the Clashing Rocks. Seeking to establish further his heroic status and claim to the throne of Thessaly, Jason looks to Hercules as an established hero. Hercules' arrival and display of wrestling is followed by a long shot of Jason and his fellow athletes admiring Hercules and moving to the foreground of the frame to greet him, Jason repositioned in medium shot. All men are drawn to Hercules, signalling their respect and recognition of his higher, heroic status. Both Jason's and the audience's perception of Hercules shifts radically during the course of the latter's scenes.

Hercules and Jason are first framed together in a medium long shot that places Jason on the left and Hercules in the centre right of the image (*fig.4*). Hercules is positioned face-on to the camera, emphasising further his dominance of both the shot and the admiring Jason. This sense of seniority is underlined in Hercules' dialogue: 'I mean to sail with you, Jason. Tell me which champion you want me to beat.' His desire to join the crew of the Argo is not a request but a stated intention. He demands to be matched against only the best

athletes and denies there can be any element of competition, as his victory is inevitable and cannot be questioned. This confidence in his heroic status, which could be construed as arrogance, is matched by an assumption that this status is not and cannot be shared or matched by the other athletes. Jason's dialogue in the next shot, 'I know you can beat us all. Your place is reserved', would appear to endorse this view, yet the framing of this medium shot is less clear-cut (*fig.5*). Jason is placed in the centre left of the frame, Hercules in the centre right, evoking a sense of equality endorsed further by the characters shaking hands and appearing to be, in this framing, of similar height. Furthermore, it is Jason who is now placed face-on to the camera, suggesting that Hercules' dominance of the athletes' meeting and, by implication, of the homosocial order they represent, is open to challenge.



Fig.4 *Jason and the Argonauts*



Fig.5 *Jason and the Argonauts*

The contrasting and—in due course—competing forms of masculinity represented by Hercules and Jason are underlined by a generational schism, the former depicted as a noticeably older man. Jason’s shifting relationship with Hercules can be read as an allegory for a younger generation’s disappointment and disillusionment with an older generation that was previously respected, trusted and even worshipped. While generational conflict is more obviously represented by Jason’s antagonism towards the usurper-tyrant Pelias, its simplistic good-versus-evil construction lacks the relative complexity afforded his relationship with Hercules. Pelias is a villain who remains a villain, while Hercules is a hero—his heroism pre-established beyond the film’s diegetic space—who is deprived of this status.

The Kennedy Ideal

The competing masculinities embodied by Hercules and Jason can be related to wider debates on male potency within the United States during the early 1960s. Some critics of

1950s America claimed it marked a period of conformity, anonymity, apathy and unquestioning compliance to the dictates of the corporate business machine. Individualism, ambition and initiative were not only surplus to requirements but potentially threatened the stability of the capitalist structure and, by implication, society as a whole. Robert J. Corber notes:

Men were discouraged from competing aggressively with one another and were expected to submit to corporate structures in exchange for obtaining a secure place in the organisational hierarchy...The successful negotiation of the corporate hierarchy depended less on personal ambition and individual initiative than on respect for authority, loyalty to one's superiors, and an ability to get along with others – all qualities traditionally associated with femininity.³⁴³

Respect, loyalty and sociability were not intrinsically negative qualities yet their promotion at the expense of more traditionally masculine attributes had steadily undermined the masculine potency – and therefore strength – of America, both individually and collectively. While space does not permit a detailed discussion of this phenomenon, commentators argued that an increasingly urbanised, corporate and consumerist American society risked undermining the spirit, drive and virility of the modern American male, which in turn sapped the national strength and will in the face of Soviet aggression. K.A. Cuordileone states: 'One social commentator after another in the 1950s had decried the softness of Americans, their lack of self, of character and inner strength...Americans grown self-absorbed and apathetic.'³⁴⁴ Whatever the simplifications and generalisations of this view, it gained wide currency during the late 1950s against a backdrop of heightened Cold War tensions. If American males were becoming soft, apathetic and inward-looking, their Soviet counterparts were increasingly tough, determined and ambitious.

As mentioned above, John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign and subsequent presidency emphasised repeatedly that America needed a new spirit, toughness and leadership that only he could provide, especially in its international relations at a time of marked US-

³⁴³ Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America* (Durham, North Carolina & London: Duke University Press, 1997) p.6

³⁴⁴ Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005) p.172

USSR antagonism. Kennedy was by no means the first US leader to cultivate a public image of masculine toughness. John F. Kasson notes how Theodore Roosevelt, president from 1901-1909, promoted himself as a horseman, hunter and soldier.³⁴⁵ Kennedy's 1960 election campaign invoked the concept of the 'New Frontier', which in Cuordileone's words, 'promised to reinvigorate the nation with the spirit of courage, adventure, daring, and self-sacrifice that its would-be leader personified'.³⁴⁶ Robert D. Dean identifies the Kennedy persona with 'an elite ideology of masculinity, focused on heroic deeds of masculine will and courage in the "public" sphere'.³⁴⁷ The timidity, apathy and self-centredness that had supposedly taken root in American society during the previous decade was no longer merely frowned upon but actively condemned as unacceptable, dangerous and downright un-American.

In part, Kennedy aimed to recapture what E. Anthony Rotundo terms 'passionate manhood', a concept that first took root in America during the late nineteenth century and promoted qualities such as ambition, competitiveness, combativeness and toughness as positive attributes rather than dangerous urges to be repressed and controlled.³⁴⁸ Kennedy allied these qualities with the physical prowess, discipline and sense of purpose required of both an athlete and an international statesman. It is notable that Kennedy's promotion of the strong, athletic male body drew on the classical world, which also inspired the US-centred bodybuilding culture. Cuordileone states that Kennedy 'imbued his physical fitness crusade with an aura of classical sophistication by invoking the example of the ancient Greeks. They saw excellence in body as the complement to excellence in mind.'³⁴⁹ Dean concurs: 'He [Kennedy] imagined the ideal as one resembling a kind of classical Greek masculinity...an *agon* of physical, mental, spiritual striving.'³⁵⁰ While this reference to the Greek ideal could be represented as a superficial marketing strategy, the appeal to classicism—whatever Kennedy took this concept to mean—is significant in itself. In 1960s America, Ancient Greece and its associated masculinity was a cultural reference point

³⁴⁵ Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man. The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001) p.4

³⁴⁶ Cuordileone, 2005, pp.168-169

³⁴⁷ Dean. *Imperial Brotherhood* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003) p.179

³⁴⁸ Rotundo. *American Manhood* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993) pp.5-6

³⁴⁹ Cuordileone, 2005, p.203. The concept is also found in Roman culture, *mens sana in corpore sano*, 'a healthy mind in a healthy body'.

³⁵⁰ Dean, 2003, p.179

shared by a sufficient number of the people Kennedy wished to address and influence. Just as Jason selects his crew of Argonauts through intense competition—with the notable exception of Hercules—so Kennedy assembled a team of bureaucrats promoted both for their minds and bodies, sportsmen as well as intellectuals. As Dean notes, members of the presidential team were expected to demonstrate their sporting prowess and tenacity through such events as fifty-mile hikes: ‘Kennedy repeatedly created scenarios for the ritual enactment of physical ordeals as tests of manhood.’³⁵¹

From this perspective, it is instructive to look at images of Kennedy circulated publicly during his presidential campaign and presidency and the qualities they invoke. The photograph of Kennedy during his wartime service on the PT-109 motor torpedo boat (*fig.6*) frames the young lieutenant in medium long shot, his expression purposeful and resolute. Kennedy’s exposed upper body shows him to be of average build, rather than spectacular physical dimensions, underlining his supposed ‘Everyman’ status and corresponding courage, patriotism and spirit at a time of both national and global crisis. On an extra-textual level, the picture serves as a reminder that Kennedy earned war hero status in 1943 by saving fellow crewmen after the boat was sunk during enemy action, a courageous, selfless deed in the public sphere. The PT-109 incident remained valuable currency for Kennedy during his presidency and was perpetuated and circulated further in popular entertainment media, inspiring a hit song, ‘PT-109’ (1962), performed by Jimmy Dean, and the film biopic *PT-109* (Leslie H. Martinson, 1963), starring Cliff Robertson.

³⁵¹ Dean, 2003, p.183



Fig.6 Lieutenant John F. Kennedy on the PT-109

The portrait shot of Kennedy (*fig.7*) emphasises his looks, widely regarded as handsome, his style and grooming. While these elements could be characterised as superficial, they proved marketable assets in the promotion of the Kennedy brand image. The tilt of his head and the upward glance connote intelligence, thoughtfulness and aspiration, all qualities befitting a national and by extension world leader. Though clearly older than the figure in the PT-109 shot, Kennedy retains an aura of youthfulness, now enhanced by the quality of maturity and its associated experience, wisdom and judgement. The picture of Kennedy with his wife Jacqueline and two children (*fig.8*) promotes the devoted husband, father and all-round family man. The image emphasises the personal aspect of the public man while also providing the strongest evidence possible of his masculine virility in reproductive terms. The white-painted wooden frame of the porch suggests civilisation and

domesticity, while the open landscape connotes closeness to nature and associated freedom. These three images, and hundreds like them, enabled ordinary Americans to feel they were being granted closer and privileged access to their President in terms of his illustrious past, public role and private life.



Fig.7 President John F. Kennedy



Fig.8 John F. Kennedy with family

Kennedy's public image also had wide recognition and appeal outside the United States, as reflected in contemporary foreign media coverage. An interesting example is found in the Italian magazine *Ercole*, subtitled *rivista di cinema e culturismo* ('the review of cinema and bodybuilding'), which focused on the *peplum*, its stars and developments in the associated bodybuilding culture. The September 1963 issue features a photograph of Kennedy making a speech (fig.9).³⁵² Wearing a suit and tie, his middle and lower body concealed, he offers a marked contrast to the images of bodybuilders that dominate the magazine, usually dressed in no more than posing briefs. However his facial expression and hand gesture have connotations of forcefulness, determination and striving also linked with bodybuilding culture. Furthermore, the quoted speech emphasises strength, youth, health, vigour and vitality, all qualities essential for a champion bodybuilder. The quoted material may not be representative of the speech as a whole or even an accurate translation of the original text. Nevertheless, the use of Kennedy in *Ercole* reflects how his image and associated ideology were felt to have relevance and appeal for the magazine's target readership. The qualities and values embodied by the US president had wide application outside the American political sphere, intersecting here with an avowedly Herculean model of masculine strength and potency that was by its classical nature constructed as both timeless and universal.



Fig.9 Kennedy in *Ercole* magazine

³⁵² *Ercole*, September 1963, Year 3, Number 9, p.23

A number of US films produced around this time can be linked, albeit in differing ways, with the new intellectual yet virile masculinity associated with Kennedy. This is not a question of a direct connection, in terms of a Kennedy-inspired film cycle, with the obvious exception of *PT-109*. I would argue, however, that several key films of this era reflect ideas and images associated with the Kennedy persona, including *Jason and the Argonauts*. I have selected two other examples, *Ocean's Eleven* and *Sergeants 3*, and will discuss each in turn. *Ocean's Eleven* addresses the notion of collective endeavour in a fashion both similar to and at variance with that promoted by the Kennedy administration and, indeed, by *Jason and the Argonauts*. This caper movie is a vehicle for actor-singer Frank Sinatra (a prominent Kennedy supporter) and fellow Rat Pack members Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford (Kennedy's brother-in-law) and Joey Bishop. *Ocean's Eleven* stresses the main characters' youth, just as Kennedy's youthfulness relative to incumbent president Dwight D. Eisenhower was employed successfully as a campaigning tool, connoting spirit, vitality and bold new ideas. Similarly, Danny Ocean (Sinatra) and his pals represent a new generation of entrepreneurs, criminal or otherwise, with the initiative and ability to execute a robbery previously thought impossible. I would argue the gang's activities also reflect a disillusion and disappointment—both personal and professional—with post-war life in 1950s America. High-level corruption and greed, political and otherwise, are taken for granted. Only two of the team, Ocean and Tony Bergdorf (Richard Conte), are married and both have separated from their wives, running against the grain of stable suburban domesticity and equally secure heterosexual relationships. There is an interesting, if undeveloped, critique of 1950s consumer culture, the men placed under undue economic pressure to provide the luxury and status goods desired by their female partners (Bergdorf turned to crime to buy his wife a white fox-fur stole). The Las Vegas heist offers a chance for these men to reclaim their wartime masculine potency and power, demanding both strength—of body and mind—and intelligence. Unlike Kennedy and Jason, who represent benevolent leadership and opposition to tyranny, Ocean's eleven express their masculinity in terms marked as self-centred and illegitimate, evading official retribution but ultimately failing in their mission.

If *Ocean's Eleven* reflects male discontent with 1950s America and its associated 'soft' masculinity, the Rat Pack western *Sergeants 3* can be read as addressing the challenges facing the Kennedy administration during the early 1960s, in terms of tough leadership, foreign aggression and racial equality, in the form of a cavalry-versus-Indians narrative. Team leader Sergeant Mike Merry (Sinatra) is not super-human, unable to beat a giant-sized buffalo hunter in a fair fight, much as Jason could not defeat Talos without assistance from Hera. However, Merry, like Kennedy and Jason, can adapt to his enemy and fights the renegade Indians with any method necessary. Merry's position in the army hierarchy marks him as an establishment figure. As with Kennedy, Merry breaks with the previous generation and style of leadership yet must establish a new order and command the respect of his subordinates. *Sergeants 3* constructs a series of inter-group tensions between Merry and his comrades and while Merry's leadership is ultimately endorsed, he also becomes more open to suggestion and, by extension, the notion of collective endeavour.

Set in 1873, eight years after the American Civil War and the official abolition of slavery, *Sergeants 3* reflects 1960s debates on racism and the growing Civil Rights movement which Kennedy supposedly endorsed, without offering a consistent or even coherent stance on the various issues, constrained perhaps by the requirements of generic verisimilitude. Jonah Williams (Sammy Davis Jr.) is a freed slave whose wish to join the army is frustrated by the colour bar, a clear sign of persisting racism in post-Civil War—and post-World War II—America. However, Williams is characterised less by a sense of pride and self-worth and more an endless desire to please, belong and achieve acceptance on white man's terms. His reward for several heroic acts—and serious injury—is acceptance into the army at the lowest level of private (*fig. 10*). The achievement of racial integration, depicted as a proud accomplishment, is therefore marked by qualification and restriction, emphasised by the standing Williams being flanked by two white soldiers on horseback, elevated above him.



Fig.10 *Sergeants 3*

It could be argued that many US films of this era reflect, to whatever degree, ideas associated with the Kennedy image and, by extension, the Cold War situation. I suggest contrasting and more conservative forms of heroic masculinity can be found in historical epics of the period, notably *The Alamo* (John Wayne, 1960) and *El Cid* (Anthony Mann, 1961). Set in 1836 Texas, *The Alamo* is concerned with resistance to a military dictator, inviting Cold War parallels, though the climactic defeat of American forces, albeit of a heroic variety, renders too close a comparison problematic. Davy Crockett (John Wayne) is first seen in long shot, on horseback, flanked by his men, part of a homosocial group marked further by their distinctive buckskin outfits. The middle-aged Crockett serves as a paternal leader, his status reaffirmed through regulated, non-dangerous contest and combat. While the films discussed above can be categorised broadly as intersecting with a Kennedy-era Democratic worldview, *The Alamo* articulates clearly its conservative political stance. Crockett declares to his Mexican lady friend Flaca (Linda Cristal): 'Republic. I like the sound of the word.' Flaca refers to Crockett as 'Mr. Tall American', underlining his masculinity, size, nationality and the associated physical and moral strength.

El Cid is set in 11th century Spain, where nobleman and soldier Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar (Charlton Heston) leads the country's defence against invading Islamic fundamentalists from North Africa. Initially depicted as a youngish man, Rodrigo ages noticeably during

the course of the narrative, acquiring grey hair and a beard, standard markers of mature masculinity. Like Crockett, he is a patrician figure and natural leader who does not seek leadership, holding the crown of Valencia but refusing to claim it for himself. The younger generation is represented by the royal family, Prince Alfonso (John Fraser), Prince Sancho (Gary Raymond) and Princess Urraca (Genevieve Page), in terms of petulance, immaturity, division, selfishness, conflict and, ultimately, fratricide. The relationship between Alfonso and Urraca is explicitly marked as unnatural, Sancho taunting his brother: ‘You held her too close!’ I would agree with Leon Hunt’s assertion that this implied incest is a clear marker of ““deviant” behaviour signifying the decadence of a corrupt regime’.³⁵³ Serving as newly crowned King Alfonso’s surrogate father, Rodrigo leads by example, bearing the responsibilities of a king until Alfonso acquires the character and honour of a king, alongside the status and power he previously abused. The humbled and penitent Alfonso now resembles a younger version of Rodrigo, reinforcing the notion that the qualities of leadership have finally been passed from one generation to another. This sense of continuity is notably absent in the relationship between Jason and Hercules or, indeed, the transition from the Republican Eisenhower to the Democrat Kennedy.

Both *Ocean’s Eleven* and *Sergeants 3* reflect various aspects of the Kennedy administration. Qualities associated with the Kennedy image also intersect with the depiction of the adult Jason, a fearless man of action who undertakes a perilous voyage into the unknown, battling hostile forces in his quest for a prize that will deliver his country from oppression and endorse his rightful leadership. While I do not suggest the figure of Jason was consciously modelled on the Kennedy ideal—though Charles Schneer pitched *Jason and the Argonauts* to Columbia a month after Kennedy’s election victory—his representation in the film chimes with contemporary debates over a revitalised American masculinity where hard-headedness and determination combined with youth, intelligence and fair-mindedness. Of course, the Kennedy image would acquire a posthumous association with mythology of an Anglo-Saxon variety. Interviewed after her assassinated husband’s funeral, Jacqueline Kennedy revealed he loved the closing song from the 1960 Broadway musical *Camelot*. The Kennedy administration was subsequently known as Camelot, drawing a direct parallel with the legendary court of King Arthur, or at

³⁵³ Hunt, ‘What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic’, *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men*, eds Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993, pp.65-83) p.75

least the Americanised popular entertainment it had inspired.³⁵⁴ In retrospect, this analogy invites some uncomfortable parallels—in terms of intrigue, betrayal, infidelity and corruption—yet at the time the association of Kennedy and his inner circle with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table gained wide currency, suggesting honour, chivalry, glamour and, above all, a mythical heroism to equal that of Jason.

It would be both restrictive and reductive to characterise *Jason and the Argonauts* as a veiled Cold War allegory rendered in Greco-Roman mythological form, with Jason standing in for Kennedy. What I do suggest is that the film was devised and produced at a time of heightened international tensions and reflects this political climate in ways both unconscious and conscious. Cuordileone asserts: ‘Kennedy placed the imperative for courage, nerve, will, and self-sacrifice in competitive Cold War terms’³⁵⁵ and the US press book for *Jason and the Argonauts* makes explicit reference to the Cold War. It is difficult—if not impossible—to gauge the extent to which exhibitors and the media pursued this angle yet the fact that Columbia regarded the Cold War as a suitable promotional tool is itself of considerable interest. An account of producer Charles H. Schneer’s search for authentic locations, intended for reproduction in newspapers and magazines, states: ‘Journeying across most of Southern Europe, he followed Jason’s alleged route, according to classical scholars, and at one point was led perilously close to the sputnik-launching Black Sea area on the fringe of the Iron Curtain where Jason is said to have found the coveted Golden Fleece.’³⁵⁶

This segue from historical accuracy to contemporary relevance is interesting on several levels. The emphasis on peril implies Schneer placed himself in personal danger in the line of duty, a combination of scholarship, adventurousness and masculine toughness in line with the Kennedy ideal. Moreover, the Soviets’ launch of the sputnik satellite in 1957 had

³⁵⁴ Sources: Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1988) p.42; John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York & Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1997) p.145. Brown states, ‘Camelot suggested that the Kennedy presidency was a special time...glittering with glamour, full of benevolence, and presided over by a handsome king with his beautiful queen’ (Brown, 1988, p.42).

³⁵⁵ Cuordileone, 2005, p.172

³⁵⁶ *Jason and the Argonauts* press book, 1963, p.15

come as a shock to America,³⁵⁷ suggesting as it did that Russia was way ahead in the much-debated space race. There are stories of public events being halted midway so an announcement could be made to a stunned, sometimes disbelieving audience.³⁵⁸ Evoking the sputnik affair served to remind Americans of a major Cold War upset, while underlining that the Soviet technological and political threat embodied by this satellite was still an unpalatable reality, as represented by the Iron Curtain. Far from being a remote figure of ancient history—if not outright myth—Jason becomes a fearless Cold Warrior in the Kennedy mould, crossing new frontiers in the name of rightful leadership for himself and peace and security for his country. Just as Kennedy had gone head to head with the USSR during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis,³⁵⁹ so Jason and his elite team of warriors make a successful military incursion into enemy space to (re)claim a prized object that confers great political power. As with Kennedy's promotion of the New Frontier, the film suggests lasting peace must be secured overseas as well as at home.

Hercules Diminished

If Jason reflects the new intellectual manliness of the Kennedy era, the masculinity embodied by Hercules is by implication ineffective and anachronistic. During the 1960 election campaign, the JFK team argued repeatedly that incumbent president Eisenhower and his vice-president Richard Nixon represented a tired leadership that lacked the toughness, discipline and determination necessary to deal with Soviet aggression.³⁶⁰ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a political analyst and Kennedy adviser, characterised the Eisenhower

³⁵⁷ Cuordileone, 2005, p.177

³⁵⁸ Novelist Stephen King relates how a Saturday matinee screening of *Earth vs. The Flying Saucers* was interrupted, allowing the visibly shaken theatre manager to inform the audience – mostly children – of the sputnik launch (King, *Danse Macabre* (London: Futura, 1982) pp.15,17,21-22).

³⁵⁹ As Dean and Cuordileone note, Kennedy's handling of the missile crisis can be read sympathetically, the President remaining firm yet level-headed in the face of communist aggression, or as the reckless act of an insecure man, obsessed with his 'tough guy' image and America's position as leader of the free world, that took the US and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war (Dean, 2003, pp.9-10; Cuordileone, 2005, pp.230-231).

³⁶⁰ Cuordileone, 2005, p.181

administration as ‘the politics of fatigue’,³⁶¹ implying a lack of both strength and will in the president and his inner circle. Kennedy’s campaign speeches included the line: ‘The old era is ending. The old ways will not do.’³⁶² While the Kennedy team avoided personal attacks on Eisenhower, the implication seemed clear. As Cuordileone notes, ‘aged, exhausted leadership would now give way to that of youth, strength and courage’.³⁶³

I see little direct connection between Eisenhower and Hercules yet the latter as represented in *Jason and the Argonauts* also embodies an aging, faltering generation whose flawed male potency is both compromised and reckless, in contrast to the depictions of heroic paternal masculinity in *The Alamo* and *El Cid*. On the most obvious level, Hercules’ hair and beard have touches of grey and he is markedly older than Jason, who has smooth features, neatly cropped dark hair and a beard, underlining his youth but also his manliness. Hercules is usually bare-chested, which reflects his heroic virility yet also, perhaps, an underlying anxiety over this virility and consequent need to express it constantly in physical terms. This relates back to the 1950s ‘crisis of masculinity’, reflecting social, cultural and political upheaval, which I discussed in Chapter Two. Hercules’ first appearance and cry of ‘He’s here!’ imply a need for recognition and reassurance that he is still the hero of reputation. His unkempt hair and mangy lion skin suggest a man who is wild, uncivilised and undomesticated. The skin is also a reminder and trophy of his first labour, slaying the Nemean lion, and as such serves as a marker of former glory, here presented as worn and battered. It is notable that Hercules bears more than a passing resemblance to the older Rodrigo in *El Cid* (*fig. 11*), though the maturity embodied by the latter has very different connotations. The aged, injured and prone Rodrigo represents not weakness or frailty but near-superhuman strength of mind, transcending his exposed, arrow-pierced body to fight on and triumph even beyond death.

³⁶¹ Quoted by Ethan Mordden in *Medium Cool. The Movies of the 1960s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) p.32

³⁶² Quoted in Cuordileone, 2005, p.167

³⁶³ Cuordileone, 2005, p.173



Fig.11 *El Cid*

Jason's torso remains covered throughout *Jason and the Argonauts*, whether by a simple tunic or leather breastplate, suggesting his conception of masculinity is not centred on the open display of his physique. Opting for tailored garments over animal skins, Jason embraces the trappings of civilisation and also possesses a wider social and political perspective than Hercules, manifested in his communion and debate with the gods of Olympus. Like Kennedy, he negotiates deals and alliances, however temporary or expedient, such as his bargain with the blind prophet Phineas (Patrick Troughton), ridding the latter of tormenting harpies in exchange for information. Jason also adapts to and masters new spaces and environments, contending with potentially or actively hostile inhabitants. Hercules seems increasingly awkward and out of place, becoming inflexible and stubborn. Associated with rugged individualism, Hercules operates within a very small sphere—the heroic yet reckless adventurer—and becomes lost outside it. On another level, Hercules' cultured English accent equates the character with the fading, largely impotent British Empire, unfavourably compared and contrasted with Jason's embodiment of America's ever-growing superpower status.³⁶⁴

³⁶⁴ It is notable that the stars of Italian-produced Hercules films—Reeves, Mark Forest, Reg Park, Alan Steel, Ed Fury *et al*—were invariably dubbed with American accents in the English-language versions of their films, regardless of the performer's nationality.

The marginalisation of Hercules in *Jason and the Argonauts* is, I suggest, a necessary and inevitable strategy given his prescribed subservience to Jason and, on another level, the special effects-dominated set-pieces. The film's very title plays down Hercules' role and significance. On an inter-textual level, the US press book for *Jason and the Argonauts* does not feature an image of Hercules or billing for actor Nigel Green on the cover. Green is thirteenth-billed in the cast list and the inaccurate plot synopsis does not mention Hercules at all.³⁶⁵ The press book includes a brief, comic-strip rendition of the basic plot in simple black-and-white line drawings. This section features the only image of Hercules, holding a giant pearl inside the treasure house of the gods while the armoured Jason stands behind him, looking disapproving (*fig.12*). The representation is inaccurate on several levels yet underlines Hercules' loss of heroic masculinity. From a narrative perspective, Jason is not present during the treasure house scene—which pairs Hercules with Hylas—nor is he (Jason) dressed in armour during the Talos sequence. It is Hylas who shows an interest in the pearl, while Hercules is drawn to the pin he mistakes for a javelin. The spatial relocation of Jason and change in costume causes the association of weaponry to shift away from Hercules, whose masculine potency is, arguably, compromised further by his fascination with jewellery, a traditionally feminine adornment and object of interest.



Fig.12 *Jason and the Argonauts*

³⁶⁵ Press book, 1963, p.14

Jason's authority over the Argonauts, Hercules included, is asserted openly prior to the Isle of Bronze sequence, as he conveys Hera's warning to take only food and water. A medium long shot depicts Jason staring directly at Hercules, his first open challenge to the latter. Jason then moves towards Hercules, from left to centre left of the frame, takes a step up, and places himself on a higher level than Hercules, both literally and figuratively (*fig.13*). This composition reverses the characters' positioning during a key scene in *Hercules*, where it is Steve Reeves' Hercules who occupies the high ground, elevated above and isolated from Jason and the other Argonauts. Here, Jason is already in a position of leadership, albeit a tentative one, prior to his meeting with Hercules, who implicitly challenges Jason's authority but does not seek official leadership of the Argonauts. The competition and conflict between their respective representations of masculinity reaches its culmination in the sequence on the Isle of Bronze, where Herculean strength is reduced to impotence through interaction with a third 'character', the bronze giant Talos.



Fig.13 *Jason and the Argonauts*

Talos is manufactured by Hephaestus, god of fire and metal-working.³⁶⁶ To use the terminology of competitive bodybuilding, Talos represents the ultimate built hard body. His bronze form is a literal manifestation of the tanned or bronzed look valued by the

³⁶⁶ Harryhausen and Dalton, 2003, p.157

California-based body culture. As a moving statue, he also embodies the concept of the classically posed muscular physique as a work of living sculpture. On another level, Talos can be viewed as a critique of the bodybuilding culture, reducing the male body to a soulless machine of retribution and destruction. In some respects, his representation in *Jason and the Argonauts* relates to the US re-titling and promotion of *pepla*, which emphasise the sheer size of the main character.³⁶⁷ While Talos is not the central figure in the film, he dominates much of the publicity—in the US and elsewhere—and features on the cover of the press book. His dominance is magnified in the film itself from the first to the last shots in which he features. Standing in a valley, Hercules and Hylas (bottom centre right) are reduced to insignificance by a series of vast bronze statues, especially Talos, placed in the left of the frame (*fig. 14*). Clad for combat, with a helmet and sword, and crouched down on one knee, Talos is a tensed body ready for action.



Fig.14 *Jason and the Argonauts*

Talos can also be equated with the threat of nuclear conflict prevalent during the early 1960s, a super-weapon which cannot be defeated by conventional means. He is not deployed without provocation, however, and his representation eschews a simplistic confrontation between forces of good and evil. Contained on the Isle of Bronze, Talos is

³⁶⁷ For example, *Terror of the Barbarians* became *Goliath and the Barbarians*, while *The Vengeance of Hercules* was released—in significantly altered form—as *Goliath and the Dragon*.

not a threat unless activated by an aggressive and illegal act, in this case the theft of the pin. Jason, an intelligent leader and diplomat, is willing to follow Hera's terms to ensure the safety of his men and his mission. Hercules is not and his actions have disastrous consequences for the Argonauts.³⁶⁸ Unlike the conflicts in *The Alamo* and *El Cid*, which also invite Cold War parallels, the battle with Talos is represented as neither inevitable nor necessary.

Hercules' initial interaction with Talos, prior to the latter's attack on the Argonauts, is of special significance in relation to issues of heroic status and male potency. In most *pepla*, the hero is framed regularly in close low-angle shots that emphasise his impressive physical build and imposing presence. In this sequence, repeated high-angle long shots stress Hercules' smallness compared to Talos. One medium long shot places Talos on the centre left of the frame, looming over Hercules, the bronze statue looking off to the left. Hercules is positioned on the right, his presence reduced to the back of his head and shoulders. As Talos turns his head to look at Hercules, the latter looks up to meet the statue's gaze (*fig. 15*), then backs away to the right and out of the frame. Hercules' absence serves to confirm Talos' dominance of the image. Subsequent long shots show Hercules fleeing from Talos, the former's avowedly heroic masculinity reduced to impotence by the latter's gigantic hard body and transition from stillness to motion. Hercules is emasculated throughout the duration of the sequence, this loss of male potency underlined by the absence of his emblematic lion skin. A long shot places him behind the unarmed Argos (Laurence Naismith), an older man, and the youthful Hylas, as they await the approach of Talos, Hercules sheltering from the consequences of his actions behind two physically weaker men who make no claim to his heroic status. When Hercules does attack Talos, stabbing at his foot, his efforts have no effect at all and do not even prompt retaliation from the giant. To underline Hercules' loss of heroic masculinity, Hylas is killed by the toppling remains of Talos—drained of his life essence by Jason—while trying to retrieve the fallen pin, Hercules' illegitimate prize. Both *The Alamo* and *El Cid* highlight the climactic martyrdom of the aging yet resolute hero in an explicitly national and political context. Hercules is a rootless figure with no discernible country or ideology and the martyrdom in the Isle of Bronze sequence falls on his young friend Hylas, leaving Hercules alive yet

³⁶⁸ Hercules' actions could be paralleled with the more negative accounts of Kennedy's attitude during the Cuban missile crisis, where his reckless bravura came close to causing Soviet nuclear response.

shamed, diminished and redundant. The arrogance and foolishness of the older generation has doomed a prime example of the younger generation, one who earlier beat Hercules at the discus by employing his brain over the latter's brawn.



Fig.15 *Jason and the Argonauts*

Hercules' final scene sees the fallen hero with his head bowed, avoiding rather than meeting the looks of other men, let alone demanding them as he did during his introduction. A medium long shot places Hercules between Jason, Argos and crewman Polydeuces (John Crawford), who now regard him with sorrow and pity rather than admiration (*fig.16*). The film cuts to a high-angle shot as the diminished Hercules retrieves his lion skin from the ship, marking both his former glory and his departure from the Argonauts and the quest for the Golden Fleece, another animal hide of symbolic significance. As with the 1958 *Hercules*, this incarnation of the hero ultimately has no place in the patriarchal and homosocial order established and represented by Jason, though for very different reasons. Initially a figurehead for the Argonauts and accorded a status comparable with that of Davy Crockett or Rodrigo Diaz, Hercules voluntarily removes himself from their group, not because it cannot accommodate the potential threat of his super-masculinity but because this masculinity has been tested and found wanting. *The Alamo* and *El Cid* emphasise the ultimate triumph of their respective representations of heroic paternal masculinity. In *El Cid*, the deceased Rodrigo assumes a legendary status

and corresponding potency that transcends corporeality, his corpse leading the united forces of Spain to drive the invaders into the sea. A low-angle long shot depicts Rodrigo mounted on a white horse, clad in shining armour, his expression noble and resolute (*fig.17*), all conventional markers of heroic status. The last image of Hercules places him in extreme long shot, as Jason, Polydeuces, Argos and Phalerus—who heralded Hercules' arrival at the athletics contest—turn away from him (*fig.18*). They then exit frame right, leaving Hercules on his own. This image stands in contrast to the first shot featuring Hercules, where he faces the camera—and his fellow athletes—and commands their attention. Now a distant, barely identifiable figure, Hercules is subject to a spatial diminution and isolation that signifies his exclusion from the remainder of the film's narrative less than halfway through its running time.³⁶⁹



Fig.16 *Jason and the Argonauts*

³⁶⁹ *Jason and the Argonauts* runs approximately 103 minutes and 40 seconds, as timed from an NTSC DVD release of the film which retains the original 24 frames per second running speed. The last shot of Hercules occurs approximately 50 minutes and 47 seconds into the film.



Fig.17 *El Cid*



Fig.18 *Jason and the Argonauts*

Hercules' interaction with Jason anticipates and initiates the erasure of his heroic masculinity at the hands of Talos. In terms of contemporary reception, this strategy was identified and commented on by a number of critics. Eyles notes Hercules is 'here

presented as something of a liability',³⁷⁰ a negative attribute that stands in marked contrast to his representation in the 1958 *Hercules* and its Italian-produced successors. While Eyles' review does not attach any significance to this radically different depiction of Hercules, I argue that it ties in with the promotion of Jason as a new, dominant form of masculinity. This in turn intersects with ideas of tough, liberal and youthful leadership prevalent in American politics and society throughout the period of the film's conception, production and release. Tested in terms of his male potency, Hercules is found wanting and consequently marginalised and emasculated. Jason reaffirms his role as the central protagonist and embodiment of a differentiated and functional heroic masculinity, signified by his defeat of Talos, successful completion of the quest and sustainable heterosexual bond with Medea.

Jason and the Argonauts was not a significant commercial success in the United States when released in the summer of 1963. While numbers are elusive, Harryhausen notes: 'Sadly, the film was not the box-office success we had hoped for on its initial release'³⁷¹ If box-office returns can be regarded as a reasonably accurate indicator of popular appeal, the reconfiguration of Jason as a Kennedy-style Cold War leader had little resonance for American audiences. The depiction of Hercules in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, which drew heavily on 1950s body culture and wider debates on masculine potency, rendered the mythological hero in a form both accessible and appealing to audiences and consequently became a highly commercial property. Conceived partly as a reaction to the *peplum* cycle, *Jason and the Argonauts* diminishes Hercules in favour of Jason, a relatively obscure figure from antiquity and with no associated adjective to match the familiar 'Herculean'. While Kennedy's posthumous association with Arthurian legend had clear resonance for a significant number of people, the representation of Jason did not establish a sustainable or even recognised parallel with the Kennedy-centred modern masculine heroism, which looked to the future as much as the ancient past.³⁷²

³⁷⁰ Eyles, 1963, p.26

³⁷¹ Harryhausen and Dalton, 2005, p.114. Harryhausen states that, by contrast: 'In Great Britain it was among the top 10 big money makers of the year' (Harryhausen, 1989, p.73). While this claim is hard to verify, the British trade publication *Kine Weekly* listed *Jason and the Argonauts* among 'The Box-Office Winners of 1963', as the 'Best Double-Bill' alongside *Siege of the Saxons* (Juran, 1963) (reprinted in Robert Murphy (ed.), *Sixties British Cinema* (Kent: University of Kent at Canterbury, 1986) p.194).

³⁷² Indeed, far from embodying tough, democratic leadership, Jason's pursuit of the Golden Fleece to secure kingship over Thessaly could be represented as a selfish and self-centred enterprise. It is notable the film

I argue this reading of *Jason and the Argonauts*' lack of domestic commercial success is too simplistic, disregarding other pertinent factors, not least its links, however tenuous, to the *peplum* cycle. Harryhausen suggests the film suffered from its association with the *peplum*, which by 1963 had lost much of its audience appeal in the US: 'The exhibitors and the public seemed to form a premature judgement based on the title and on the vogue'.³⁷³ Three years on from *Hercules Unchained*, *peplum* films no longer received the saturation promotion and distribution that had attracted vast audiences and box-office receipts. Though *peplum* films were theatrically distributed in the US until the mid-1960s, the genre's blockbuster success was a relatively short-lived phenomenon, reflecting a decline in audience interest. Released towards the tail end of the cycle, *Jason and the Argonauts* was promoted in a fashion that did not distinguish it sufficiently from the *peplum*, even though Schneer and Harryhausen's earlier fantasies were very successful, especially *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, and could have been employed far more extensively as a marketing tool. Released to coincide with the 1963 school summer vacation, *Jason and the Argonauts* was sold primarily as a film for children with a campaign evoking a tired genre parodied over a year earlier by *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, released in February 1962. Regardless of the extent to which Jason's youthful intellectual masculinity intersects with that promoted by Kennedy, the setting and subject matter of *Jason and the Argonauts* combined with its generic associations and promotional campaign did not permit Jason to be received at the time as a viable signifier of masculine leadership for 1960s America, despite the clear contrast with a faltering, discredited Hercules. By contrast, *Ocean's Eleven* and *Sergeants 3* were aimed at adults as much as children, set in familiar US locations and, unlike *Jason and the Argonauts*, featured stars with proven box-office status, not least Frank Sinatra, an entertainer with multi-media appeal, an image that emphasised leadership and virility, and, of course, personal links to Kennedy.

offers little depiction—or even sense—of Thessaly on any terms, let alone as an oppressed kingdom in need of liberation, while the majority of the Argonauts are not characterised to any extent and serve little narrative function.

³⁷³ Harryhausen, 1989, p.73

Conclusion

This chapter has explored representations of Herculean masculinity in *Jason and the Argonauts* in terms of emulation, differentiation and inversion. This depiction is, I argue, a conscious, strategic and acknowledged reaction to *Hercules* (1958) and the Steve Reeves incarnation of the title character, and relates to 1960s debates on a new or renewed American masculinity as embodied by John F. Kennedy. Cuordileone states the Kennedy presidency offered, ‘a reconciliation of intellect...with masculine virility’³⁷⁴ and the representation of Jason, rather than Hercules, shares or at least evokes these characteristics. While linkage of this kind should be treated as tentative and speculative, the US promotional campaign for *Jason and the Argonauts* emphasised the central quest’s contemporary relevance in terms of Cold War parallels. By contrast, the representation of Hercules and his associated heroic masculinity subverts and erases his familiar attributes to reduce the super-man to a man. The film invites the spectator—intra- and extra-diegetic—to recognise and acknowledge Hercules and his pre-established heroic status, yet dismantles this status over his remaining scenes. Hercules is markedly older than the Reeves version, his physical presence less spectacular and the Herculean feats of strength few and modest compared with the standard *peplum* representation. *Jason and the Argonauts* systematically devalues Herculean masculinity as an ineffectual, outdated and unstable construction that can neither lead nor serve an evolving patriarchy. My next chapter continues this analysis of Herculean potency, as represented in the Italian-produced film *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961). Like *Jason and the Argonauts*, this *peplum* both acknowledges and departs from the depiction of heroic masculinity in the 1958 *Hercules*, framing the title character in terms of humorous inversion, domesticity and pointed allegory.

³⁷⁴ Cuordileone, 2005, pp.169-170

Chapter Four

Ercole e la dolce vita: Domestic Comfort and Foreign Threat in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

This chapter looks at *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide (Hercules Conquers Atlantis)*,³⁷⁵ Vittorio Cottafavi, 1961). From its initial reception onwards, the film's depiction of Hercules has been identified as substantially and significantly different from that embodied by Steve Reeves in *Hercules* (Pietro Francisci, 1958) and its sequel *Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959). I am interested in the nature of this difference, how it has been presented in previous critical commentary and what it may reflect of wider debates during the early 1960s, both in Italy and elsewhere. While not as obviously radical or subversive as the representation of Hercules in *Jason and the Argonauts* (Don Chaffey, 1963), discussed in Chapter Three, the protagonist of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is noted for his passivity and preference for idle leisure over strenuous activity. This is in clear contrast to the unconditionally virtuous figure of *Hercules*, whose moral code is linked inexorably with self-discipline and heroic deeds of action. Kim Shahabudin suggests this later film incarnation of Hercules is inconsistent, unpredictable and above all unreliable in both the domestic and foreign spheres.³⁷⁶ I shall argue that the apparent placidity and self-indulgence of this Hercules reflects a deliberate strategy of humanisation, or rather a domestication of the character. This process involves the incorporation of Hercules into a stable order which does not compromise or undermine his extra-ordinary masculine potency, a reconciliation notably absent in the 1958 *Hercules*.

To expand and develop this argument, I compare and contrast the film's depiction of masculinity with other Italian films of this era, focusing largely on *La dolce vita* (Federico

³⁷⁵ US title: *Hercules and the Captive Women*

³⁷⁶ Shahabudin, 'Ancient Mythology and Modern Myths: *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961)', *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*, eds Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp.196-216) pp.204-205

Fellini, 1960)³⁷⁷ and *Accattone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1961). Unlike *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, these films are set in modern-day Italy, and address contemporary social, cultural and political issues in forms intended to have clear extra-filmic relevance and significance. As Peter Bondanella and Jacqueline Reich observe, Italy during the late 1950s and early 1960s experienced increasing employment, a booming economy and emergent consumer culture.³⁷⁸ Angelo Restivo suggests this ‘economic miracle’ also created new power relations between the *nouveaux riches* and the aristocratic upper class.³⁷⁹ Tullio Kezich identifies *La dolce vita*’s main theme as ‘café society, the diverse and glittery world rebuilt upon the ruins and poverty of the postwar period’.³⁸⁰ Especially Rome became a popular destination for the international jet set,³⁸¹ providing both foreign income and foreign celebrities. *Accattone* reflects the flipside to this economic transformation, the mass internal migration of the impoverished rural populace creating a huge underclass living on the outskirts of the big cities.³⁸² The pressures, tensions and contradictions of this ‘new’ Italy are reflected in the films’ male protagonists, journalist Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni) and pimp Accattone (Franco Citti).

Hercules Conquers Atlantis also intersects with contemporary debates, despite being conceived, produced, promoted and, for the most part, received as a mythological fantasy adventure far removed from everyday realities. Just as Rubini and Accattone seek a comfortable, easy or ‘sweet’ life on terms that do not impair their conceptions of masculine potency, so Hercules expresses a desire for the domestic sphere, as opposed to the foreign incursions associated with the standard *peplum* hero. The film constructs a tension between domestic comforts and exterior strife—as embodied by a foreign threat—only Hercules can resolve. Thus, the character is associated with a balancing of domestic, local and international responsibilities which relates, albeit indirectly, to various debates in

³⁷⁷ Frank Burke suggests that *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers a socio-political critique which places it ‘in perfect alignment’ with Italian art films of the era such as *La dolce vita* (Burke ‘The Italian Sword-and-Sandal Film From *Fabiola* (1949) to *Hercules and The Captive Women* (1961): Texts and Contexts’, *Popular Italian Cinema. Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*, ed. Flavia Brizio-Skov (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011, pp.17-51) p.47). He does not however develop this argument to any significant degree.

³⁷⁸ Peter Bondanella, *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) p.132; Jacqueline Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover. Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004) p.24

³⁷⁹ Angelo Restivo, *The Cinema of Economic Miracles. Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film* (Durham, North Carolina & London: Duke University Press, 2002) pp.39-40

³⁸⁰ Tullio Kezich, *Federico Fellini. His Life and Work* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007) p.203

³⁸¹ Reich, 2004, p.24

³⁸² Restivo, 2002, p.53

circulation at the time of the film's release, within and outside Italy. In contrast to *La dolce vita* and *Accattone*, which highlight representations of modern Italy and Italianness as constructed around the male protagonist, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers both an exploration of major global issues of the era and a reflection on the recent past. On a sub-textual level, Hercules is confronting a tripartite menace: fascism, nuclear annihilation and 'unnatural' feminine authority, all of which threaten the domestic stability and material comfort with which he is now associated.

The production context of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is worth outlining, especially given its nominal and—in English-language commentary—largely unrecognised status as a sequel to *La vendetta di Ercole*³⁸³ (Cottafavi, 1960). As noted in previous chapters, *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* were major successes at both the local and international box-office. While Steve Reeves and Pietro Francisci moved on to other projects, the Hercules brand was still perceived as a valuable commodity by the Italian film industry. The next film produced and released in Italy was *La vendetta di Ercole*, an Italian-French co-production,³⁸⁴ with the title character played by Lou Degni, an Italian-American bodybuilder billed as 'Mark Forest'.³⁸⁵ Compared to *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, its representation of heroic masculinity does not depart radically from the Steve Reeves Hercules. I will address the significant aspects of Degni's Hercules later in the chapter.

La vendetta di Ercole opened in Italy on 12 August 1960, a week before a rival Hercules film, *Gli amori di Ercole* (*The Loves of Hercules*,³⁸⁶ Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, 1960), starring Jayne Mansfield and Mickey Hargitay. While *La vendetta di Ercole* did not match the previous Hercules films at the local box-office, it was a notable success and proved the character still had wide audience appeal independent of Reeves,³⁸⁷ prompting producer

³⁸³ While the film's Italian title translates literally as 'The Vengeance of Hercules' or 'The Revenge of Hercules' it was not released as a Hercules film in English-speaking territories. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the film under its Italian title, as there is no English-language equivalent.

³⁸⁴ Involving Achille Piazzoli Produzione Cinematografica, Produzione Gianni Fuchs and Comptoir Français du Film Production.

³⁸⁵ The film was released in the United States and the United Kingdom in re-edited form as *Goliath and the Dragon*, including added scenes featuring the title creature.

³⁸⁶ Also released in the US as *Hercules versus the Hydra*.

³⁸⁷ *La vendetta di Ercole* grossed 799,404,134 lire. *Hercules* took 887,384,717 lire, while *Hercules Unchained* made 890,010,448 lire (source: Gianni Rondolino (ed.), *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965* (Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore, 1979)) pp.134, 145, 172-174.

Achille Piazzzi to embark on a follow-up, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*.³⁸⁸ Degni declined to return as Hercules and was replaced by British bodybuilder Reg Park. Like Reeves, Park was an international bodybuilding champion, achieving second place to Reeves in the 1950 Mr. Universe contest, who went on to win the title in 1951 and 1958.³⁸⁹ Park also published his own bodybuilding magazine, *Reg Park Physical Culture Journal*. As discussed in Chapter Two, the bodybuilding culture promoted muscular development for display rather than strength. Shahabudin notes, ‘Park was unusual in this respect, usually ending his bodybuilding exhibitions with a display of actual strength.’³⁹⁰ While Shahabudin cites this attribute as a reason for Park being cast as Hercules,³⁹¹ it is reasonable to suggest his imposing, powerful physique and strong yet benevolent features were more significant factors (*fig.1*). While Park’s Hercules lacks the sharply defined, or ‘sculpted’ form and classical good looks of the Reeves incarnation, his appearance was deemed by producer Piazzzi to be suitably Herculean in terms of previous *pepla* representations and predicted audience response.

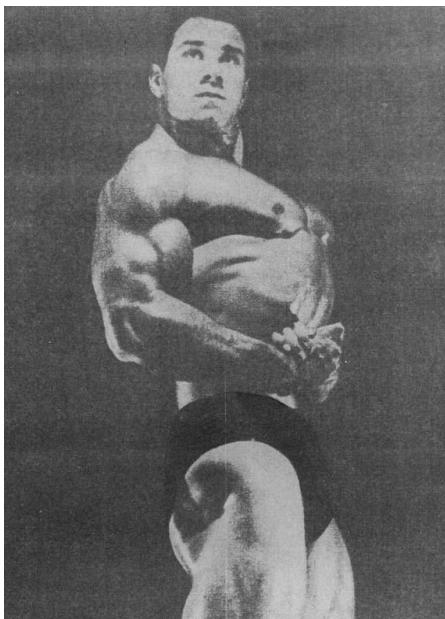


Fig.1 *Reg Park*

By contrast, *The Loves of Hercules* was significantly less successful in the domestic market, grossing 547,553,589 lire (Rondolino, 1979, p.156).

³⁸⁸ Another French-Italian co-production, between Piazzzi’s SPA Cinematografica and CFFP.

³⁸⁹ Tim Lucas, *Mario Bava. All the Colors of the Dark* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Video Watchdog, 2007) p.376. Park was crowned Mr. Universe for a third time in 1965.

³⁹⁰ Shahabudin, 2009, p.213

³⁹¹ Shahabudin, 2009, p.213

In terms of the wider film culture in Italy, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* has points of comparison with *La dolce vita*. Both were Italian-French co-productions, filmed at the Cinecittà studios outside Rome,³⁹² feature character actor Mino Doro in a small role,³⁹³ and employ American or British actors in leading roles, an established strategy for securing international distribution. While *La dolce vita* confines its American or American-based stars to ‘guest’ roles, Fellini had used Hollywood actors in his films since the early 1950s, before the advent of the *peplum*, such as Anthony Quinn and Richard Basehart in *La strada* (1954).³⁹⁴ I will discuss the appearance of actor Lex Barker in *La dolce vita*, and what he represents, in relation to the figure of Marcello Rubini. It is also worth noting, as Bondanella states, that Fellini’s casting for *La dolce vita* ‘was, as always, based on the actor’s image on the screen rather than any special dramatic talent.’³⁹⁵ This has similarities with the standard strategy for casting *peplum* films, where a star’s physical appearance and screen presence far outweighed matters of dramatic training or experience. In both instances, performers were routinely dubbed by other actors for both domestic and international markets. Given Fellini’s acquaintance with Pier Paolo Pasolini, it is not surprising to find points of intersection between *La dolce vita* and *Accattone*. Pasolini made uncredited contributions to Fellini’s film,³⁹⁶ in terms of the story and casting, and *Accattone* employs three of the same actors.³⁹⁷

The plot of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* can be summarised as follows: Returning from a visit to a tavern, Hercules (Reg Park), his son Hylus (Luciano Marin) and their friends King Androcles of Thebes (Ettore Manni) and the dwarf Timotheus (Salvatore Furnari) are confronted with a vision of impending disaster that threatens Greece. Androcles plans a sea

³⁹² *Pepla* often recycled props left over from bigger-budgeted films, raising their production values for negligible outlay. A dancer’s mask seen in a nightclub sequence in *La dolce vita* reappears in the sequel to *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, *Ercole al centro della terra* (*Hercules in the Centre of the Earth*, Mario Bava, 1961), worn by the Sybil.

³⁹³ According to some sources, composer-arranger Armando Trovaioli and set designer Italo Tomassi worked on both *La dolce vita* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. However, Trovaioli is not credited on the latter and Tomassi has no credit on either film, making their participation hard to verify.

³⁹⁴ Fellini appears to have cast Quinn and Basehart by choice, after meeting them on the set of *Donne proibite* (*Angels of Darkness*, Giuseppe Amato, 1953), which starred Quinn, Giulietta Masina, Fellini’s wife, and Valentina Cortese, who was married to Basehart (Kezich, 2007, p.148). However, Fellini would have known that *La strada*’s co-producer, Dino De Laurentiis, favoured using Hollywood actors with a view to foreign sales.

³⁹⁵ Bondanella, 1992, p.142

³⁹⁶ Kezich, 2007, pp.202, 262

³⁹⁷ Adriana Moneta, veteran comedian Polidor and Franca Pasut, whose character is sexually exploited or humiliated in both films.

expedition to confront the unknown menace, only to discover that neither his fellow Greek kings nor Hercules are willing to join him, the latter preferring to be with his wife Deianeira (Luciana Angiolillo). Unable to proceed without the demigod, Androcles plots with Hylus to drug Hercules and place him on board the boat. After a shipwreck, Hercules is separated from his companions and washed ashore on the island of Atlantis, where he rescues the princess Ismene (Laura Efrikian) from the blood-drinking god Proteus (Maurizio Coffarelli). Hercules returns Ismene to her mother, Queen Antinea (Fay Spain), only to discover a bewitched Androcles who treats him as an enemy. Antinea has used the blood of Uranus, a source of unimaginable power, to create an army of super-warriors with which she plans to conquer the world. Advised by Zantas (Mario Petri), priest of Uranus, Hercules destroys the blood of Uranus by exposing it to direct sunlight. The ensuing chain reaction devastates Atlantis as Hercules, his companions and Ismene escape by boat.

As with *Jason and the Argonauts*, key personnel involved with the production of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* stated retrospectively an intention to subvert the familiar image of Hercules as portrayed in the Steve Reeves films. Tim Lucas quotes co-writer Duccio Tessari: ‘The idea to make an ironic Hercules was mine and Cottafavi’s.’³⁹⁸ The filmmakers planned both to undercut viewer expectations relating to Hercules and provide a critical commentary on the conventions of the *peplum* genre. While Tessari’s claim does not necessarily qualify as documentary evidence, it is supported to an extent by an analysis of the film, though the characterisation of Hercules as ‘ironic’ is of course open to debate. Shahabudin sees a clear distinction between Reeves’ virtuous Prodican Hercules, as discussed in Chapter Two, and the character as depicted in this film, where Hercules is ‘often unconcerned for heroic conventions, unreliable as a husband, and ineffective as a father’.³⁹⁹ I do not agree with this reading of the character and will address the issues raised in turn.

³⁹⁸ Lucas, 2007, p.384

³⁹⁹ Shahabudin, 2009, p.204

Hercules at rest

Reg Park's Hercules is described repeatedly in terms of his passivity. Tom Milne's review of the film's 1986 UK videotape release notes Hercules' 'unshakeable placidity'.⁴⁰⁰ Leon Hunt suggests the film: 'is striking for the initial passivity of its hero...the very lying and the play of the sun on his body allow the camera to objectify him'.⁴⁰¹ It is notable that, unlike Milne, Hunt qualifies Hercules' inaction, suggesting later developments, a point I address further on. There is little argument that the film foregrounds images of Hercules at rest, especially during its first half hour. When Androcles debates the threat to Greece with his fellow kings, Hercules is framed as a passive background figure. He reclines on some steps, cushioned by a leopard-skin rug, dressed in a fine tunic and sandals that connote wealth and leisure (*fig.2*). His relaxed, supine body is contrasted with armed guards standing to his right, implicitly men of action, dressed for combat. Later on, the camera tilts down from the top of a ship's mast to reveal Hercules asleep on the deck, oblivious to the activity around him. As Queen Antinea's guest, he rests on a couch, dressed once more in a costume suggesting leisure and opulence rather than action. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the passive, exposed male body risks being appreciated and evaluated in terms more usually associated with the female form, undermining its masculine potency and evoking an undercurrent of homoeroticism. These images of Hercules do not even resort to the strategy, derived from physique photography, of showing the male body upright and tensed as if caught in mid-action.

⁴⁰⁰ Tom Milne, 'Hercules Conquers Atlantis', *Monthly Film Bulletin* January 1986, Vol. 53, No. 624, p.19

⁴⁰¹ Leon Hunt, 'What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic', Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (eds), *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993, pp.65-83) p.71



Fig.2 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

At the start of *Hercules*, Reeves' hero is first seen uprooting a tree in the performance of an act of rescue. Park's Hercules is a notable non-participant in the extended tavern fight that opens *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, despite his presence throughout the sequence. The first shot of Hercules has him seated at a long table, dining from a plate and cup, seemingly oblivious to the brawl taking place around him (*fig.3*). The location is itself significant, a tavern being associated with recreation, leisure and repast, a pause from action connoting both passivity and indulgence. By contrast, *La vendetta di Ercole* opens with Hercules on a perilous mission involving strenuous physical activity and super-human strength. He climbs down a steep rock face, fights with a three-headed, fire-breathing dog and, a few scenes later battles with a large flying cat creature. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, a hero associated with action is conspicuously inactive, his passivity contrasted with the fighting—an extreme form of physical activity—that would appear to invite his participation or at least require his intervention.



Fig.3 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

Shahabudin reads this placidity as a reflection of self-interest and selfishness, stating that Hercules is ‘little interested in the problems of his friend, his son or his country, except when they threaten to interrupt his sleep or his dinner’.⁴⁰² Frank Burke also characterises the demigod as indolent and interested only in self-gratification.⁴⁰³ Yet the default passivity associated with Hercules is not always by choice. On a narrative level, he is put to sleep by the unwitting ingestion of drugs and later knocked unconscious during a violent storm at sea. It can be argued the light-hearted, knockabout nature of the tavern fight—which plays very much like a comedy western—does not require Hercules’ intervention until his heavily outnumbered friends are threatened with serious injury. Lucas suggests Park’s Hercules exhibits, ‘a strength so self-confident that it didn’t need to show off’.⁴⁰⁴ While Androcles and Hylus treat the brawl as an opportunity both to demonstrate and test their masculine potency in combative terms, Hercules recognises the fight for what it is: a pointless wine-fuelled expenditure of energy better employed to more constructive purpose.

⁴⁰² Shahabudin, 2009, p.205

⁴⁰³ Burke, ‘The Italian Sword-and-Sandal Film From *Fabiola* (1949) to *Hercules and The Captive Women* (1961): Texts and Contexts’, *Popular Italian Cinema. Culture and Politics in a Postwar Society*, ed. Flavia Brizio-Skov (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011, pp.17-51) p.40

⁴⁰⁴ Lucas, 2007, p.384-385

Writing near the time of the film's release, Luc Moullet argued the near-parodic representation of Hercules' lazy hedonism concealed a high moral purpose.⁴⁰⁵ While morality is a problematic concept in terms of identification and analysis, I suggest his behaviour early in the film reveals a coherent and consistent strategy unrelated to mere self-interest. Hercules' apparent indifference to the fate of others can be interpreted, in part at least, as a punitive measure against those who have questioned either his decisions or his masculine authority. Androcles and Hylus must face the consequences of their actions, whether participating in the tavern fight or kidnapping Hercules. In one scene, the camera pans left with Androcles to find Hercules resting on a beach while the ship's crew look for provisions. Far from being mere laziness, this is a strategic denial of labour, lent added significance through its association with a character famous for his extraordinary Twelve Labours. Shortly afterwards, Hercules turns his back on Androcles, underlining his calculated disassociation from the latter's homosocial group. It is notable that, Hylus and Timoteus aside, Androcles' crew consists of criminals and other lowlifes, marked explicitly as unreliable and untrustworthy. Circumstances have obliged the king to choose his allies poorly, creating a social and by implication military unit that is clearly unworthy of Hercules' assistance, even were he a voluntary participant. As discussed below, Italy's recent history was dominated by a political and military alliance with Nazi Germany, a short-lived union that ended in comprehensive defeat. Without suggesting any direct or intended link, Androcles could be equated with the patriotic yet naïve Italians who regarded the Axis pact as the best option for preserving their country's independence and strength.

This representation of Hercules has antecedents, however unintentional and undeveloped, in *Hercules Unchained*. The latter film opens with a sequence where Hercules (Steve Reeves), Iole (Sylva Koscina) and Ulysses (Gabriele Antonini) bid farewell to their companions and embark on a wagon ride to Hercules' home city of Thebes. When Iole and Ulysses complain that Hercules is driving the horses too fast, he responds by giving the reins to Ulysses and climbing into the back of the wagon for a rest. The travellers arrive in a valley strewn with human bones, where they are challenged by the giant Anteus (Primo Carnera). Aware of the threat, Hercules does not initially react to Iole and Ulysses' calls of

⁴⁰⁵ Luc Moullet, 'La victoire d'Ercole', *Cahiers du Cinema* no.131, 1962, pp.39-42, p.41

alarm, choosing leisure and indolence over action: ‘Oh, I want to sleep’. When Anteus issues a direct challenge to combat, Hercules finally responds. This delayed reaction to the immediate and undeniable threat posed by Anteus is of interest on several levels. Newlyweds Hercules and Iole have a parental relationship to Ulysses, a naïve young adult, described as ‘a boy who thinks he’s a man’. Having implicitly challenged Hercules’ judgement and patriarchal leadership, Ulysses is granted the opportunity to take the latter’s place. Hercules’ gesture of giving Ulysses control of the horses also places him in charge of their ‘family’ unit. This strategy proves both a test of Ulysses’ manhood, which is found wanting, and a punishment for questioning Hercules’ decisions and associated authority and potency.

After his kidnap in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, Park’s Hercules does not express openly his disapproval, allowing his actions—or rather inaction—to speak for him. Reeves’ Hercules articulates his dissatisfaction with Iole and Ulysses: ‘You’re playing games with me. Alright then, have your fun. I want to rest.’ Lying back and yawning, Hercules allows Ulysses to be thrown around and Iole sexually threatened by Anteus before intervening. He presents himself to Anteus as prone, vulnerable and by implication weak in both body and spirit. He even appears to give Iole up to Anteus, ‘If that’s the way it is...’ This ‘punishment’ for transgressive behaviour seems both extreme and unmotivated, especially given the characterisation of Hercules in the 1958 film. I suggest the depiction of the hero in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers a more measured, developed and consistent expression of this idea. Furthermore, his strategic denial of labour and willingness to be viewed in terms of inaction rather than action is connected to disengagement with all-male adventures in foreign lands—and the associated perils—in favour of a commitment to the domestic sphere and a stable, sustainable heterosexual union.

Hercules at home

Shahabudin identifies a further reversal of Reeves' Hercules 'when Park's hero prioritises private happiness over the public good, by unpatriotically refusing a mission to save Greece in favour of a settled family life with Deianeira'.⁴⁰⁶ This opposition of the private with the public and its associated patriotism suggests the two concepts are mutually exclusive and that Hercules is necessarily at fault for choosing the former over the latter. I argue that Hercules' prioritisation of the private sphere over the public deserves a more considered analysis, not least in its ramifications for his subsequent actions in Atlantis.

Discussing the Euripidean conception of Hercules, G. Karl Galinsky has suggested 'he is characterised as the completely domestic and loving family man'.⁴⁰⁷ This aspect of the hero is conveyed in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* and appears to have been a conscious decision on the part of the filmmakers. Quoted by Michèle Lagny, Cottafavi described his Hercules as 'a heroic-cum-comic figure...obsessed with the idea of having a home, a family and children'.⁴⁰⁸ It is notable that his wife Deianeira appears in only one scene, yet her presence is essential to the film's construction of Herculean masculinity. The sequence opens with a long shot of the prone Hercules being massaged by Deianeira, the active female acting upon the passive male (*fig.4*). Their surroundings are also significant, the room adorned with luxurious fabrics and ornaments. As earlier scenes stress, Hercules has a taste for fine wine and fine clothing and his wardrobe stands in contrast to the animal skins and simple cloth tunics worn by the Steve Reeves incarnation. The Herculean torso is revealed fully but both represented and declared to be inactive. Hercules is living the good life or *la dolce vita* and does not appear concerned with the world beyond his immediate domestic sphere.

⁴⁰⁶ Shahabudin, 2009, p.205

⁴⁰⁷ G. Karl Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme. The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1972) p.62

⁴⁰⁸ Lagny, 'Popular taste: the peplum' (trans Peter Graham), *Popular European Cinema*, eds Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992, pp.163-180) p.177



Fig.4 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

This scene could be read in terms of Herculean emasculation, the legendary man of strength and action reduced to passivity and impotence under feminine influence. Alastair Blanshard notes that ‘Deianeira’ is a classical Greek word that can be translated as ‘man killer’ or ‘husband killer’.⁴⁰⁹ In this instance the killing is figurative rather than literal yet the super-human masculinity associated with Hercules seems effectively eradicated. There is a superficially similar scene in *La vendetta di Ercole*; indeed, the set-up is near identical, Deianeira massaging Hercules against the backdrop of their domestic, familial environment (*fig.5*). In this instance, the apparent reversal of active/male and passive/female gender roles is countered on several levels. In narrative terms, Hercules has just returned home from a long, arduous and perilous quest, battling monsters and appeasing gods. By contrast, in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, he has merely put a swift end to a tavern brawl, sat through a protracted and unproductive council meeting and smashed a throne to the ground. The décor of the room in *La vendetta di Ercole* is significantly different. In place of the plush fabrics and ornaments, the chamber is dominated by a stark black and white mural painting depicting a boar hunt. The connotations of masculine action, aggression and violence are reflected in Hercules himself. Despite his prone position, he is not relaxed but agitated, his restless manner motivated on a narrative level by the inexplicably hostile behaviour of Hylus.

⁴⁰⁹ Alastair Blanshard, *Hercules. A Heroic Life* (London: Granta Books, 2005) pp.138-139



Fig.5 *La vendetta di Ercole*

I argue the massage scene in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* reflects not his emasculation, but an affirmation of his commitment to the domestic sphere, as embodied by Deianeira, and the associated responsibilities. Unlike Reeves' Hercules in the 1958 film, the Park incarnation is both a husband and a parent, his status as a family man confirmed by his adult son. Similarly, Deianeira, though attractive, is noticeably older than her incarnations in *La vendetta di Ercole* and Piazzzi's subsequent production *Ercole al centro della terra* (*Hercules in the Centre of the Earth*, Mario Bava, 1961).⁴¹⁰ This is a mature, stable heterosexual relationship that stands in contrast to the Hercules-Iole coupling in the 1958 film, the latter marked by initial meeting and mutual attraction, declared affection, disagreement, forced separation and pointedly delayed resolution. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, a medium shot depicts Hercules and Deianeira at the moment of decision (*fig.6*), where he declares his embrace of and commitment to their family unit: 'The time has come for me to settle down to a calm and tranquil life.' By necessity this precludes the perilous foreign adventures with which he is associated in earlier cinematic representations.

⁴¹⁰ The actress cast as Deianeira in *La vendetta di Ercole* looks barely older than her adult son, the requirements of a young and glamorous female lead to play opposite Degni's Hercules at odds with the film's narrative and thematic demands. In *Hercules in the Centre of the Earth*, Hercules and Deianeira are not yet a married, domesticated couple, their union disrupted by malevolent forces.



Fig.6 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

This voluntary domestication also underlines the film's humanisation of Hercules, in both visual and thematic terms. Discussing depictions of Hercules in classical literature and drama, Galinsky notes how the mythical hero 'could be humanised only in those episodes of his life that were not a part of his mythic deeds.'⁴¹¹ Hercules in action must be the super-human demigod, precluding his ready incorporation into the domestic sphere embodied by Deianeira and Hylus. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, Hercules' humanity is associated with self-indulgence, selfishness, arrogance and above all frailty, as reflected in his advanced years and less than spectacular physique. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, domesticity and consequently humanity is equated with mature adult responsibility. While Nigel Green's Hercules steals a brooch from the treasure house of the gods, the Park incarnation pays for his tavern meal prior to stopping the brawl, participating voluntarily in a system of economic exchange that characterises a capitalist consumer society. The ornaments in Hercules and Deianeira's chamber include a statue of a soldier. This upright, armed figure, ready for violent action, could be read as a contrast to the prone, relaxed, seemingly defenceless Hercules. I suggest it serves more as a pointed reminder of Hercules' masculine potency, ready to be tapped if needed but only by his choice and on his terms. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the hero makes a conscious, explicit choice of domesticity and heterosexual union over adventure and homosocial bonding.

⁴¹¹ Galinsky, 1972, p.112

Hercules' relation to the public and private spheres contrasts with that of journalist Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastroianni) in *La dolce vita*, who mingles with celebrities and aristocracy with apparent ease yet maintains a distance from them, often playing the role of passive, marginalised observer. While Hercules is himself a celebrity of sorts, a friend of King Androcles and a hero of corresponding status, Rubini's living is dependent on celebrities and a public appetite for gossip and scandal associated with Rome's high society and visiting film stars. Rubini's participation in the good life is always outside the domestic sphere. His own domestic space is a sparsely furnished apartment in a drab modern concrete building. As in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the revelation of this domestic space introduces the male protagonist's female partner. In place of Deianeira, who massages her husband and engages in both reasoned conversation and mutual affection, there is Emma (Yvonne Furneaux), Rubini's troubled girlfriend, first seen screaming incoherently in the throes of an overdose. This reflection of domestic discontent and trauma reveals Rubini's selfishness as he protests Emma's action as a threat to his social status and professional reputation, 'Do you want to ruin me?' His access to the rich and famous—and any associated gossip—is dependent on his own personal life remaining free of scandal, or at least out of public circulation.

While Hercules mingles freely with royalty and Rubini moves easily in upper-class society, the eponymous protagonist of *Accattone* is marked explicitly as working-class, a pimp living in a Rome slum district. On the surface, Accattone has little in common with either Hercules or Rubini, yet he serves as the focus for some intersecting debates on masculinity and male potency. In terms of domesticity, Accattone has a wife and son, but is alienated and separated from them by his inability to provide a stable and sustainable family unit. He makes allusion to the ancient world, comparing himself with the pharaohs who died wearing their wealth. Accattone presents himself as another man of leisure, talking, eating, swimming and drinking. In contrast to Hercules and Rubini, whose fashionable sunglasses complement his handsome, smooth features and slicked back hair, Accattone is physically unimposing, with sunken eyes, hangdog features, a slight build and slouched posture.

Rubini is not necessarily as he appears in early scenes of *La dolce vita*. The celebrity-chasing reporter is intelligent, well-educated, cultured and multi-lingual, yet rather than being kept in reserve these potentially positive qualities have been steadily eroded by the superficial, materialist, sterile environment he inhabits and by his own moral weakness. Fellini described the character as ‘a witness, but at the same time implicated in what he witnesses’.⁴¹² Rubini cannot be a neutral observer, unaffected and untainted by what he sees. Capable of self-awareness and self-criticism, Rubini does not translate this reflection into action, showing no commitment to anything or anyone. During a party scene, he conspicuously avoids both Emma’s gaze and her associated talk of a long term relationship. Rubini’s accusation that Emma represents ‘aggressive, clinging, maternal love’ reflects rather his own passivity, detachment and immaturity. Fellini claimed: ‘The monster [a large fish washed up on the beach] in *La dolce vita* was a mirror of the degeneration of the hero.’⁴¹³ For all Mastroianni’s sleek appearance, on a moral level Rubini is just another slowly decaying corpse, a grim novelty attraction for passers-by. Reich describes Rubini as ‘a classic *inetto*’ or anti-hero, who ‘actively chooses passivity and alienation as a way of life’.⁴¹⁴ Hercules employs a passive mode for both relaxation and a selective denial of labour yet retains his active mode where necessary and is in no way alienated from either the public or domestic spheres. From this perspective, Hercules can participate fully in the good life that Rubini must observe from a distance.

Hercules unleashed

It should be emphasised that this domesticated, familial Hercules retains the extra-ordinary physical appearance and capabilities associated with the Reeves incarnation. In the first sequence of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the tavern brawl ends abruptly when Hercules halts the progress of an impromptu battering ram with one hand and proclaims: ‘That’s enough now, boys’, associating the participants with a reckless, immature form of masculinity that manifests itself only in terms of drunken combat. When Androcles’ crew

⁴¹² Costanzo Costantini (ed.), *Fellini on Fellini* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) p.49

⁴¹³ Costantini, 1995, p.132

⁴¹⁴ Reich, 2004, p.xiv

mutiny and start rowing the ship away from the island, Hercules grabs hold of the huge anchor chain and slowly hauls the boat back to shore (*fig.7*). Super-human strength is validated, inspired and indeed nurtured by Hercules' open, uncomplicated enjoyment of the good life and associated domestic stability and responsibility. In one scene, Hercules bends some metal bars (*fig.8*) to effect an exit from Antinea's palace then bends them back again to disguise his departure, complementing his physical power with applied intelligence. This signifier of masculine strength, toughness and perseverance became a standard *peplum* fixture from *Hercules* onwards but dates back at least as far as the strong man acts seen in circuses, sideshows, music halls and street performances during the nineteenth century. In *La dolce vita*, Rubini is framed against vertical white posts during a party sequence (*fig.9*), an image evoking clearly a prisoner behind bars. Unlike Hercules, Rubini cannot bend or break these bars to facilitate his escape, either literally or figuratively. He seems content to lean against them, acknowledging his entrapment with resigned indifference.



Fig.7 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*



Fig.8 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*



Fig.9 *La dolce vita*

As discussed above, the passivity of Hercules is often a mere pose, which links with the posing associated with bodybuilding culture, where the regulated display of the muscular male body does not as a rule develop into a demonstration of corresponding physical strength or athletic accomplishment.⁴¹⁵ In contrast to Hercules, the passivity associated with Rubini and Accattone is not undercut by the revelation of either physical or mental prowess. Rubini is contrasted over three scenes with Robert (Lex Barker), an aging American actor now working in Italian films. Bespectacled and pipe-smoking, Robert is associated initially with passivity and apathy, a far cry from Barker's best-known screen

⁴¹⁵ In *La dolce vita*, a nightclub act features two masked musclemen, whose exposed bodies are purely for display, entertaining the wealthy patrons.

role as Tarzan. In *Tarzan and the Slave Girl* (Lee Shoem, 1950), the second of his outings as the character, the loincloth-clad hero is depicted repeatedly in scenarios of action and combat, armed with a knife, a bow and arrow or his bare hands (*fig.10*). Barker's subsequent career in Italian action films intersects with his Tarzan role and the ongoing *peplum* cycle. For example, in the medieval adventure *Il terrore della maschera rossa* (The Terror of the Red Mask, Luigi Capuano, 1960), his heroic knight is associated with the outdoors and nature, engages in regular combat and is framed in heroic low angles. He wrestles and kills a bear equivalent to the lion associated with both Tarzan and the *peplum* heroes, and endures a prolonged whipping rather than submit to the villains.



Fig.10 *Tarzan and the Slave Girl*

Barker's casting in *La dolce vita*, also released in 1960, references and subverts his established screen image as part of its wider critique of celebrity culture and the illusory nature of stardom. Dozing drunkenly in his car, Robert is reduced to mere paparazzi fodder (*fig.11*). One of the photographers remarks, 'And to think he played Tarzan', underlining the extra-filmic connection between the character Robert, the actor Barker and a leading cultural icon of unrestrained, uncontainable masculine strength and virility. His subsequent attack on Rubini becomes just another performance for the camera, or press cameras, in marked contrast to the heroic Tarzan. This brief 'fight' is framed in long shot (*fig.12*), emphasising the photographers' staging of the scene in encouraging Robert's aggression. As Robert reasserts his potency and dominance, in a form marked as questionable if not illegitimate, Rubini's already fragile male potency is undermined further. Despite the

entreaties of the *paparazzi*, he does not retaliate or even resist, taking the blows and crumpling to the ground, unable or unwilling to counter the aggression of a man marked as an aging, drunken has-been long past his physical prime. Nor can Rubini match the intellectual rigour and integrity of his writer friend Steiner (Alain Cuny), who also offers an example of domestic contentment, as represented by his wife and two children and wide circle of friends.⁴¹⁶ In some ways, Rubini is the polar opposite of brutish strongman Zampanò (Anthony Quinn) in Fellini's *La strada*. Whereas Rubini is cultured, articulate and charming, Zampanò, as Bondanella notes, is 'constantly compared to animals in his speech, his behaviour, his coarse treatment of Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina)... Even his strongman routine seems devoid of any intelligence or style.'⁴¹⁷ Breaking chains with his chest muscles, Zampanò boasts of having 'ribs of steel and superhuman strength' yet he exhibits 'Herculean' strength only for financial reward or concealing a crime, lacking the wit and moral purpose of the true Hercules. Nor can the rootless Zampanò match Hercules' commitment to the domestic sphere, his abuse of Gelsomina echoing Rubini's less physical mistreatment of Emma. Where Hercules lounges on a beach as a calculated admonishment to King Androcles, Zampanò is last seen prostrate in the sand, weeping. The contrasting masculinities of Rubini and Zampanò, while offering an appearance of potency are both revealed as inadequate.



Fig.11 *La dolce vita*

⁴¹⁶ It should be noted that a narrative twist undercuts and negates this representation of Steiner.

⁴¹⁷ Bondanella, 1992, pp.105-106



Fig.12 *La dolce vita*

In Pasolini's film, Accattone gives ready submission to stronger males and is shown to be impotent against rival pimps, police and so-called friends. His one 'daring' feat is the dive from Ponte Sant'Angelo, on the Tiber that serves only to win him a petty wager, while a street fight with his ex-wife's brother ends in public humiliation. Whereas Hercules' passivity is often a calculated pose, Accattone is inactive to a degree that brings poverty and starvation.⁴¹⁸ Economically, he is dependent on female earnings, largely from prostitution, and compares his one morning of manual labour to enslavement at Buchenwald concentration camp. In *Mamma Roma* (Pasolini, 1962), the pimp Carmine (Citti) makes for an interesting comparison with Accattone. First seen as a groom, seated at his wedding banquet dressed in a suit and tie, Carmine has adopted a veneer of social respectability and mobility. However, he still looks to *Mamma Roma* (Anna Magnani), an ex-lover and former prostitute, for money, encouraging her to pursue immoral earnings for his financial benefit.

The comparison of Herculean masculinity with other male figures in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is also revealing. On the most obvious level, the perfect body of Hercules is contrasted repeatedly with the imperfect body of his friend Timotheus (*fig.13*), a strategy also employed—to a lesser degree—in *La vendetta di Ercole*. Maggie Günsberg identifies 'the midget as epitome of male powerlessness made comic (and thereby less alarming).'⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ 'Accattone' is a nickname that translates as 'beggar'.

⁴¹⁹ Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.118

The depiction of Timotheus also suggests all men are children compared to Hercules, a benevolent father figure. Hercules first bares his torso as he lifts Androcles' throne above his head and dashes it to the ground. While this demonstration of superhuman strength has a clear and stated symbolic significance—Androcles' kingdom will not be usurped while he is absent—the latter is unappreciative: 'What a waste of a fine throne.' While this could be read as both subverting and questioning a typically Herculean show of strength, Androcles' attachment to a material manifestation of his kingship, not to mention its associated power, status and wealth, suggests he lacks the wider perspective of the older, wiser Hercules.



Fig.13 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

Hercules' relationship with his son Hylus affirms the former's commitment to the domestic, familial sphere. According to Blanshard, the Hercules of Greco-Roman myth is attributed with having many sons—between 60 and 100—but little contact with any of them; furthermore: 'In a world which prized the father-son relationship above all else, Hercules is a failure.'⁴²⁰ By contrast, the hero of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is the epitome of paternal responsibility and discipline, as when Hercules associates Hylus' initiation of the tavern brawl with a lack of respect for social convention, which he finds unacceptable. The sense of affirmed domestic bliss at the end of the scene with Deianeira is undercut by the uncertain expression on Hylus (*fig.14*), clearly reluctant to forgo homosocial adventure in favour of familial containment and associated security. Overeager to prove himself in

⁴²⁰ Blanshard, 2005, pp.149-150

terms of masculine prowess, the youthful Hylus seeks adventure, while the wiser Hercules, a man with nothing to prove, is content to have it find him.



Fig.14 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

When Hercules and Hylus are trapped together in a subterranean cell, the son is dwarfed by the father (*fig.15*). Hercules' imposing, ideal physique is contrasted further with Hylus' slender, dirt-coated torso, and the composition and framing of the scene emphasise Hercules' role as paternal protector. While Hylus clearly lacks Herculean strength, there is a sense of generational continuity, the son demonstrating his worth to the father. Having saved Ismene once, from Proteus, Hercules subsequently delegates the task to Hylus, who rescues the princess from captivity on two occasions. Hercules' paternal attitude to Ismene on their first meeting anticipates her subsequent heterosexual union with Hylus, which in turn ensures as far as possible the continuation of Hercules' bloodline. The film concludes with an image of Hylus and Ismene embracing, underlining the former's achievement of a mature masculinity defined in terms of a domesticity and commitment also embraced and promoted by his father. In this respect, at least, the son of Hercules displays an evolving, proactive and productive masculinity denied Androcles, a figure latterly associated with inactivity, female domination and, by implication impotence.



Fig.15 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

The most notable male opponents of Hercules are the elite guards of Antinea, discussed in detail below. His first combatant is Proteus, a shape-shifting villain whose lack of a fixed, solid form is equated with a corrupt, parasitical nature, Proteus feeding on the blood of his victims. First seen as an old man, Proteus takes the form of fire, a snake, a lion, a vulture and a large lizard-like monster yet this succession of metamorphoses proves no match for the constant, integral body of Hercules. Having trapped Proteus in his lizard form, Hercules tears out the latter's horn, an act of symbolic—and bloody—castration that destroys Proteus' masculine potency and, therefore his life.

On the other hand, Hercules acknowledges the patriarchal authority and superior power of his father Zeus, another nebulous, indefinable form of masculinity. At several key points in the film, Hercules calls upon Zeus for aid or at least divine favour as he performs an extraordinary physical feat of strength or searches for his friend Androcles. In *Hercules*, the title character recognises and respects the gods but neither invokes nor requires their assistance in the performance of his labours. The hero of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* recognises and accepts his human limitations. In this instance, Park's Hercules is closer to the representation of Jesus Christ (Enrique Irazoqui) in *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Pasolini, 1964), whose entreaties to God and accompanying gazes to heaven are expressed in terms of their father-son relationship. The comparison of Hercules with Christ in terms that favoured both was by no means a recent

phenomenon, dating back several centuries. As Galinsky notes, while the early Christian church attacked Hercules:

Once the religious threat he posed had vanished, Hercules, along with other pagan deities, conveniently entered into the realm of allegory and under the aspect of the supreme exemplar of virtue and justice was eventually even identified with Christ.⁴²¹

This Hercules/Christ analogy dates back to the early 14th century,⁴²² and can be found in works by Dante and Milton.⁴²³ Park's Hercules, more so than the Reeves incarnation, embodies both virtue and justice while acknowledging and respecting the higher authority or patriarch represented by God the Father or Zeus.

Hercules' relationship to divinity—in whatever form—finds visual parallels in both *La dolce vita* and *Accattone*, certainly in terms of Christ or crucifixion imagery. After the ship is lost in a storm, a long shot frames the unconscious Hercules floating on a piece of the wrecked boat, arms outstretched in a crucified position (*fig. 16*). This image recalls a similar shot in *Hercules*, where the hero, temporarily helpless, assumes a position associated with both suffering and divine grace that anticipates his subsequent resurrection. In the opening scene of *La dolce vita*, Rubini is juxtaposed with the figure of Christ, as his press helicopter follows a second helicopter carrying a large statue of Jesus over Rome towards the Vatican (*fig. 17*). Rather than suggesting any link between Rubini and Christ, the sequence underlines the spiritual emptiness of modern society. Rubini is merely pursuing a news story, pausing to flirt with some women sunbathing on a rooftop. Christ is flying over Rome, arms outstretched, but powered by modern technology, not divine grace. In the Pasolini film, Accattone stands on a bridge, body exposed, adopting a position of mock martyrdom as he prepares to jump off (*fig. 18*). The religious associations are increased considerably by his sharing the frame with the statue of an angel holding a cross. Rather than ascend to heaven, Accattone falls to earth or, rather into the Tiber, anticipating a steady descent, moral and physical throughout the film that culminates in his accidental, unheroic death in a traffic accident while escaping the police.

⁴²¹ Galinsky, 1972, p.188

⁴²² Galinsky, 1972, p.202

⁴²³ Galinsky, 1972, pp.203 and 205



Fig.16 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*



Fig.17 *La dolce vita*



Fig.18 *Accattone*

Just as Zeus watches over Hercules, Hercules watches over his family and friends. In the final scene, he is shown steering the ship on its homeward voyage (*fig.19*). A long shot places Hercules to the right of the frame, elevated above Timotheus, Hylus and Ismene. This composition recalls an image in *Hercules*, where the latter is elevated and isolated from his mutinous shipmates, underlining his distance from them. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the arrangement of figures invokes very different connotations. On a narrative level, the ship's passengers are in harmony with each other, reunited after the successful resolution of a perilous adventure, with Ismene rescued from Atlantis and Androcles restored to his senses. On a visual level, the paternal protector Hercules is separate from his companions but also linked to them, via the tiller and ship's rail, creating a line that joins all the characters. Having ensured the well-being of his family, friends, Greece and by extension the entire world, Hercules supervises the journey that will return him to his pre-established, long-term domestic sphere.



Fig.19 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

'A peril from afar'

The release of and response to *La dolce vita* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, though different on many levels, provide an interesting comparison. By the early 1960s, as Bondanella notes, most *peplum* films were aimed largely at the *seconda visione* or second-run circuit, cinemas away from the urban centres, with significantly cheaper ticket prices.⁴²⁴ Goffredo Fofi concurs that 'the Italian audience for the genre was mainly in the rural south and the migrant areas of industrial cities'.⁴²⁵ While the *peplum* genre remained profitable three years on from *Hercules*, few of the films attracted serious critical attention, let alone interest from the mainstream national press. By contrast, *La dolce vita* received a high-profile Rome premiere at the Cinema Fiamma.⁴²⁶ In terms of public reception, the film was attacked by the right-wing press, such as *Il Secolo d'Italia*,⁴²⁷ and criticised by ultra-right politicians in parliament for causing 'clear offence to the virtues and probity of the population of Rome' and offering 'a banal mockery of Rome's highest mission as the centre of the Catholic world and ancient culture'.⁴²⁸ *La dolce vita* thus assumed an extra-cinematic social, political, cultural and religious significance that, though couched in negative terms, ensured it a level of circulation inaccessible to most feature films. Costantini concurs that 'Fellini was accused of having made Rome into a symbol of human folly, vice and perdition'⁴²⁹ and the Catholic Church responded directly to the film. *L'Osservatore Romano*, a Vatican publication, condemned *La dolce vita* in seven articles,⁴³⁰ and it was forbidden to Catholic audiences on pain of excommunication.⁴³¹ Bondanella notes how leftist critics praised the film 'for what they felt was Fellini's realistic panorama of the corruption and decadence of Italy's bourgeoisie'.⁴³² While the film's influence on Italian society is open to debate, there is little doubt the surrounding controversy contributed to its commercial success. Budgeted at an unprecedented 600

⁴²⁴ Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, 3rd edition (New York, London: Continuum 2002) p.159

⁴²⁵ Fofi, 'Maciste Sugli Schermi', *Catalogo Bolaffi del cinema italiano. Secondo volume: tutti i film dal 1956 al 1965*, ed. Gianni Rondolino (Torino: Giulio Bolaffi Editore, 1979) [unnumbered pages, between 253 and 254] p.v; my translation.

⁴²⁶ Kezich, 2007, p.207

⁴²⁷ Kezich, 2007, pp.208-209

⁴²⁸ Kezich, 2007, p.209

⁴²⁹ Costantini, 1995, p.52

⁴³⁰ Costantini, 1995, p.53

⁴³¹ Costantini, 1995, p.54

⁴³² Bondanella, 1992, p.132

million lire, *La dolce vita* broke domestic records, despite an increased first-run ticket price of 1000 lire, and grossed over 2.2 billion lire in Italy.⁴³³ *Accattone*, though also attacked for its portrayal of modern Rome did not achieve the status of *cause célèbre* to the same degree. The film earned critical praise and awards but only modest financial returns, taking approximately 385.5 million lire at the domestic box-office.⁴³⁴

Hercules Conquers Atlantis made just over 568 million lire in Italy, a respectable amount for a *peplum* film in 1961, but it was by no means the most popular example of the genre in this year.⁴³⁵ However, the film is notable—and unusual—among the *pepla* both for the amount of attention it received from contemporary critics and the positive nature of much of this reception. The critic for the official Vatican film review, which attached little importance to the wider *peplum* cycle, acknowledged the film's production values, spectacle and even noted the craftsmanlike direction.⁴³⁶ The British *Monthly Film Bulletin*, usually dismissive of the *peplum*, praised Cottafavi's flair, 'almost alone amongst his Italian colleagues, for this kind of cinema...'⁴³⁷ A review in *Films and Filming* also emphasised the film's craft and spectacle.⁴³⁸ What interests me in particular is the identification by various commentators of several allegorical strands in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. Writing in 1967, Rondolino praised the 'intelligent references to contemporary social and political realities... veiled behind ancient history and characters.'⁴³⁹ For the most part these contemporary references can be divided roughly into three overlapping areas: fascism, nuclear anxiety and 'unnatural' feminine threats.

⁴³³ Bondanella, 1992, p.132; Rondolino, 1979, p.163

⁴³⁴ Rondolino, 1979, p.179

⁴³⁵ Rondolino, 1979, p.186. For comparison, domestic box-office figures for other *pepla* released during 1961 include, from highest to lowest: *The Trojan War* 799.3 million lire; *Duel of the Titans* 704.7 million; *Ursus* 699.3 million; *The Colossus of Rhodes* 657.8 million; *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi (Atlas in the Land of the Cyclops)* 655 million; *Maciste l'uomo piu forte del mondo* 542.6 million; *Maciste contro il vampiro (Goliath and the Vampires)* 495 million; *Goliath contro i giganti (Goliath Against the Giants)* 486.17 million; *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan (Samson and the 7 Miracles of the World)* 468 million; *La vendetta di Ursus* 420.3 million; *The Giants of Thessaly* 407.75 million; *Hercules in the Centre of the Earth* 397.6 million (Rondolino, 1979, pp.181-197). This sample suggests *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* was in the top 50% of 1961 *pepla*, though not by a significant margin.

⁴³⁶ Anonymous, *Segnalazioni cinematografiche*, Centro Cattolico Cinematografico, vol.L, Anno 1961, Roma 1961, p.152; quoted in Gianfranco Casadio, *I mitici eroi. Il cinema "peplum" nel cinema italiano dall'avvento del sonoro a oggi (1930-1993)* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2007) p.61

⁴³⁷ *MFB*, Vol XXIX Nos. 336-347, 1962, p.112

⁴³⁸ Raymond Durgnat, *Films and Filming*, October 1962, Vol. 9, No. 1, p.35

⁴³⁹ Rondolino, 1979, p.186

Writing in *Films and Filming* in 1963, Richard Whitehall stated Cottafavi 'is giving mythology a contemporary application', identifying a fascist subtext.⁴⁴⁰ As noted in Chapter One, Richard Dyer sees a fundamental contradiction in the *peplum* with regard to fascism, as linked with Hitler's Germany and, especially Mussolini's Italy. The appeal of the muscular male body type that dominates the genre, typified and exemplified by the figure of Hercules, is inevitably in tension 'with the memory of its exaltation in the disgraceful recent past'.⁴⁴¹ Dyer goes on to suggest this tension finds its ultimate expression in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*: 'Hercules is opposed to this fascist regime but Reg Park's muscles embody its very ideals.'⁴⁴² It seems Park's Hercules is both atypical of the *peplum* genre yet also the most potent manifestation of its fascist subtext. It can be argued the active Hercules represents strong male leadership which is disregarded at high cost. The freed slaves of Atlantis ignore his counsel and attack the royal palace, only to be massacred by the elite guard. During the council of Greek kings, democracy is equated with male impotence, Hercules looking on with amused resignation as Androcles fails to win the support of his self-interested, self-absorbed peers. I suggest that *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* consciously downplays any fascist associations of the *peplum* hero with a strategy of displacement, evoking fascism in the corporeal form of his opponents in order to distinguish and disassociate it from Hercules and mark its containment and elimination.

Hercules Conquers Atlantis should be placed within wider debates relating to fascism that were prevalent in Italy at the time of the film's conception, production and release. In 1960, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement), a neo-fascist political party achieved unexpected prominence and significance. Formed in 1948, the *MSI* was dominated initially by supporters of Mussolini's *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Italian Social Republic), based in Salò, a short-lived (1943-45) puppet state controlled by Nazi Germany.⁴⁴³ As Paul Ginsborg notes, the *MSI* took 5.8% of the vote in the 1953 national election, which saw 'the emergence of the neo-Fascists as a permanent force in Italian

⁴⁴⁰ Richard Whitehall, 'Days of Strife and Nights of Orgy', *Films and Filming*, March 1963, Vol. 9, No.6, p.14

⁴⁴¹ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) p.176

⁴⁴² Dyer, 1997, p.176

⁴⁴³ Edward R. Tannenbaum, *Fascism in Italy. Society and Culture 1922-1945* (London: Allen Lane, 1973) p.390

politics’,⁴⁴⁴ serving also as a ‘reminder of the potent appeal that authoritarianism and nationalism could still exercise amongst the southern students, urban poor and lower middle classes’.⁴⁴⁵ Fascism, in whatever guise, retained an attraction for a minority of the geographically, economically and socially disadvantaged. Edward R. Tannenbaum suggests that while the *MSI* was relatively moderate during the 1950s, officially proclaiming Fascism to be dead, its leaders clearly still admired aspects of the Mussolini regime.⁴⁴⁶ The *MSI* remained a minor but persistent political force which, on occasion, appeared to sanction or at least not condemn direct physical confrontation as a legitimate form of activism. Tannenbaum states: ‘By the 1960s the *MSI* was also attracting secondary-school students who had no experience with Fascism but who enjoyed beating up Communists and Socialists and shouting nationalist slogans.’⁴⁴⁷ Appealing to a new generation of Italian males drawn to violence in the name of patriotism, the *MSI* remained a legitimate political party with many allies in the dominant *Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democrat) party that led Italy’s coalition government.

R.J.B. Bosworth states that while the *MSI* continued to be an active force in Italian politics, ‘they made few converts outside the extreme right’, remaining on the margins of the political mainstream.⁴⁴⁸ In 1960 this seemed about to change, as ‘the first uncertain attempt officially to legitimise neo-fascism was made, when a Christian Democrat government headed by Ferdinando Tambroni tried to rule with the “external support” of the *MSI*.’⁴⁴⁹ The Christian Democrats had been the ruling party in Italy since 1948 but did not command a workable majority and were dependent on *centrismo*, characterised by Guido Crainz as ‘an anti-communist alliance based on the Christian Democrats in coalition with some minor parties’.⁴⁵⁰ While this alliance remained viable, if not always stable, for most of the 1950s, by the end of the decade centrism was in serious difficulties.⁴⁵¹ In need of

⁴⁴⁴ Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943-1988* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1990) p.143

⁴⁴⁵ Ginsborg, 1990, p.145

⁴⁴⁶ Tannenbaum, 1973, p.390

⁴⁴⁷ Tannenbaum, 1973, p.390

⁴⁴⁸ Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London & New York: Arnold-Oxford University Press, 1998) p.53

⁴⁴⁹ Bosworth, 1998, p.109

⁴⁵⁰ Crainz, ‘The Representation of Fascism and the Resistance in the Documentaries of Italian State Television’, *Italian Fascism. History, Memory and Representation*, eds R.J.B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999, pp.124-140) p.125

⁴⁵¹ Crainz, 1999, p.125

additional support, Prime Minister elect Tambroni looked to the *MSI*. Under the terms of the deal, the Christian Democrats would rely on *MSI* votes in parliament but not give its members seats in the cabinet.⁴⁵²

Tambroni's proposed alliance with a party regarded widely as neo-fascist had ramifications that extended beyond the immediate political sphere. For much of the 1950s, there had been few public debates that addressed, let alone criticised, fascism and Italy's recent Fascist dictatorship. Laura Maritano suggests post-World War II Italy witnessed a collective form of expedient amnesia on all sides of the political divide: 'for the sake of national unity it was decided to forget the Fascist past of a large number of Italians'.⁴⁵³ While this claim can be criticised as a sweeping generalisation, Bosworth notes how the 1950s 'was marked by a profound silence about the failures, delusions and terrors of Fascism'.⁴⁵⁴ As discussed in earlier chapters, the early 1960s saw heightened Cold War tensions between the US and the USSR, the former promoting the latter as a real and active threat to the free world. Placed within the US sphere of influence, politically conservative, and vulnerable, geographically and militarily, to aggression from the Eastern Bloc, Italy had sidelined anti-fascism in favour of a staunchly anti-communist stance. To be openly critical of fascism within Italy risked accusations of communist sympathies. As Bosworth suggests, 'any hint of a critical reading of Mussolini's rule could be attacked by the anti-Communist media as insulting the war dead and "outraging" the *patria*'.⁴⁵⁵

With the communist threat dominating mainstream political debate, and a corresponding veto—official or otherwise—on anti-fascist discourse, Tambroni's courting of the *MSI* did not seem wildly at odds with the perceived consensus. Bosworth states, 'to a naïve onlooker, all that he seemed to propose was an acceptance politically of what was already the norm in the functioning of the national economy, society and culture'.⁴⁵⁶ Tambroni discovered, however, that for a significant—and vocal—number of Italians, legitimising

⁴⁵² Bosworth, 1998, p.109

⁴⁵³ Maritano, 'Immigration, Nationalism and Exclusionary Understandings of Place in Turin', *Italian Cityscapes. Culture and Urban Change in Contemporary Italy*, eds Robert Lumley and John Foot (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004, pp.61-74) p.72

⁴⁵⁴ Bosworth, 1998, pp.109-110

⁴⁵⁵ Bosworth, 1998, pp.109-110

⁴⁵⁶ Bosworth, 1998, p.110

the neo-fascist right was unacceptable and ‘the attempt failed in the face of massive, and what seem to have been spontaneous, popular demonstrations.’⁴⁵⁷ His cause was not helped by the actions of the MSI, which in June 1960 announced its annual national congress would be held in Genoa, a city associated strongly with anti-fascist resistance. Proposed guests included Carlo Emanuele Basile, the last prefect of Genoa during the Salò era and a man associated with the deportations and deaths of many Genoese.⁴⁵⁸ Tens of thousands of Genoese demonstrated, forcing the MSI to postpone their congress, and as public unrest spread to other cities, Tambroni gave the police licence to shoot in emergencies, resulting in several deaths.⁴⁵⁹ Tambroni quickly fell from grace and was forced to resign.⁴⁶⁰ Just as 1953 had seen neo-fascism rise as a persistent force in Italian politics, so the Tambroni affair marked the ascendance of anti-fascism as part of the prevailing ideology, with the result that ‘any attempt to move in an authoritarian direction...was likely to meet with a massive and uncontrollable protest movement.’⁴⁶¹

The Tambroni controversy was part of—and arguably helped facilitate—a new willingness, within Italy and elsewhere, to discuss openly and critically the country’s recent Fascist history.⁴⁶² This debate circulated in various media, including domestically produced feature films. David Ward cites *La lunga notte del ’43* (Florestano Vancini, 1960) as one of several films which ‘began to offer far less flattering images of Italy’s war and Resistance experiences which contrasted strongly with the more saintly portraits of national unity and everyday heroism that had emanated from films like *Roma: città aperta* [*Rome, Open City*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945] in the immediate post-war years.’⁴⁶³ As noted, *Accattone* includes a brief reference to Buchenwald, invoking Fascist Italy’s Axis ally and a site associated with the worst Nazi atrocities. In *La dolce vita*, Steiner states that Rubini writes journalism for ‘semi-Fascist papers’. While Steiner does not accuse his friend of harbouring fascist sympathies, he implies Rubini’s indifference to his employers’

⁴⁵⁷ Bosworth, 1998, p.109

⁴⁵⁸ Ginsborg, 1990, p.256. As Roger Eatwell notes, the MSI’s Genoa congress required government authorization, further implicating the Christian Democrats in the ensuing scandal (Eatwell, *Fascism. A History* (London: Pimlico, 2003) p.252).

⁴⁵⁹ Ginsborg, 1990, pp.256-257

⁴⁶⁰ Bosworth, 1998, p.110

⁴⁶¹ Ginsborg, 1990, p.257

⁴⁶² Bosworth, 1998, p.236

⁴⁶³ Ward, ‘From Croce to Vico: Carlo Levi’s *L’orologio* and Italian Anti-Fascism, 1943-46’, *Italian Fascism. History, Memory and Representation*, eds R.J.B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani (Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999, pp.64-82) pp.65-66

political outlook is tantamount to collusion. By extension, Italians who were indifferent or apathetic towards the Mussolini regime became complicit in its acquisition, consolidation and abuse of power. On another level, Rubini's father is played by actor Annibale Ninchi, star of the Fascist-era epic *Scipione l'Africano* (*Scipio Africanus*, Carmine Gallone, 1937), regarded widely as propaganda for the Mussolini regime's invasion of Ethiopia. While *La dolce vita* avoids any direct reference to the earlier film, Signor Rubini is depicted as an alien figure in his son's modern, cosmopolitan world, at ease only in an old-fashioned nightclub which features dance numbers from the 1920s, the decade the Fascists took power in Italy. Though jovial and courteous, he rejects Marcello's invitation to stay on in Rome and spend time with him. Emotionally distant, Signor Rubini cannot give his son the intimate connection he desires and their negligible relationship—as a boy Marcello barely saw his father, a travelling salesman—seems beyond recovery. This father-son schism is not characterised as political, yet suggests a larger generation gap where children can barely communicate with parents nostalgic for an era overshadowed by Fascism, if not for Fascism itself.

In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the fascist subtext identified by Whitehall is embodied in Queen Antinea's 'master race' of super-warriors, exemplified by her Captain (Mimmo Palmara), with his distinctive blond hair and beard and lack of eyebrows (*fig.20*). It is notable that Italian scholars such as Spinazzola and Fofi associate these warriors specifically with Nazism⁴⁶⁴ ('nazismo') rather than a broader fascist movement that would include the Mussolini regime. Fofi describes Antinea's soldiers as 'the army of Aryan robots, blond and cruel'.⁴⁶⁵ Spinazzola makes direct reference to Germany's recent history, stating 'the elect race of Antinea's warriors has Teutonic features, evoking a sense of Nazi eugenics'.⁴⁶⁶ Cammarota is more specific still: 'the "superior" warriors with which Atlantis means to dominate the world are depicted like the mannequins of Leni Riefenstahl; tall, vigorous, blond, cold eyes and inexpressive features'.⁴⁶⁷ In essence, Italian commentators characterise the warriors as Nazis in thinly disguised form and make no reference to the

⁴⁶⁴ Vittorio Spinazzola and Pierre Philippe (ed.), 'Le Carnaval Des Demi-Dieux', *Cinema 64*, No.85, April 1964, p.79; Fofi, 1979, p.vi; my translation

⁴⁶⁵ Fofi, 1979, p.vi; my translation

⁴⁶⁶ Vittorio Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico. Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945-1965* (Milan: Bompiani, 1974) p.335; my translation

⁴⁶⁷ Domenico Cammarota, *Il cinema peplum* (Rome: Fanucci, 1987) pp.53-54, quoted in Casadio, 2007, p.62; my translation

Mussolini regime. These figures are Aryan, blond, Teutonic, and the male ideal of director Riefenstahl, associated closely with the Nazi government-sponsored films *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935) and *Olympia* (1938), which construct and valorise images of human physical perfection in accordance with Nazi ideology. These parallels require at least some qualification, especially with regard to the Riefenstahl comparison. It can be argued that her heroizing of the human physique in the context of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games invites parallels between Greco-Roman and Nazi-Aryan ideals of physical perfection. However, Cammarota's claim that Antinea's warriors are blatant reproductions of Riefenstahl's Aryan heroes is open to question. Discussing the prologue to *Olympia*, Taylor Downing notes: 'For twelve minutes the film evokes a classical past and celebrates the human form...the power and beauty of the human body in motion.'⁴⁶⁸ Shots of a male athlete lighting the Olympic torch against a backdrop of Ancient Greece have a stronger link to the classical tradition than the stereotypical Nazi 'superman' and the sportsman is dark-haired rather than blond.



Fig.20 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

Above all, Antinea's super-warriors are non-Italian, their blond hair, pale skin and inexpressive features in contrast with typical or stereotypical images of Italian masculinity.

⁴⁶⁸ Taylor Downing, *Olympia* (London: British Film Institute, 1992) p.48

The identification of these warriors with or even as Nazis serves to distance Hercules further from the tinge of fascism linked with the *peplum*. The Italian reception of the film could be read as a collective denial of Italy's recent fascist past as something intrinsic to the nation and the national character. Ward suggests the post-war Italian liberal culture had a very particular take on fascism: 'the liberal reading of these years tended to view Fascism as a foreign, imported phenomenon which had had no lasting effects on Italian society'.⁴⁶⁹ From this perspective, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* participates in the new willingness to debate the Mussolini era, and by extension the Nazi alliance and occupation, yet identifies its fascist aggressors as an external threat, whether from Nazi Germany or the fabled city of Atlantis.

The link with Nazism and specifically theories of eugenics is underlined by the soldiers being clones and therefore lacking the individuality associated with Hercules. They represent an artificial form of masculinity, though it could be argued that the masculinity endorsed, promoted and perpetuated by the bodybuilding culture that supplied Reg Park is itself inherently and overtly constructed or 'built'. Shahabudin describes these clones as 'a cinematic realisation of science's power to remake men'⁴⁷⁰ and identifies a contrast and opposition between this technological power and 'the natural power of Hercules.'⁴⁷¹ This is an oversimplification, as bodybuilding culture aggressively promoted its ability to 'remake' the male form, turning weaklings into he-men. It is notable that the scene where Hercules confronts the cloned guards contains an element of contest not dissimilar to the images promoted by bodybuilding publications. Hercules lifts a marble table top over his head and dashes it to the ground, much as he did with Androcles' throne. One of the guards then matches this Herculean feat with no apparent difficulty. This could suggest these soldiers are themselves Herculean—in terms of physical capabilities if nothing else—undermining his distancing from fascist ideals. This notion is dissipated rapidly during the ensuing skirmish, where Hercules fights off the guards with ease, until removed from the arena by a hidden trap door. The direct opposition between Hercules and the super-warriors is emphasised in visual terms. The cloned soldiers resemble Hercules in

⁴⁶⁹ Ward, 1999, p.65

⁴⁷⁰ Shahabudin, 2009, p.212

⁴⁷¹ Shahabudin, 2009, p.213

photographic negative, his dark hair and relatively light clothing contrasted with their blond hair and black armour.

The notion of cloned blond aggressors with fascist associations can be found in other genres and national cinemas of this era. Subjected to sustained aerial bombardment during World War II, Britain was never overrun by Nazi troops but the fear of invasion found expression in various forms long after the end of the conflict. A notable example is *Village of the Damned* (Wolf Rilla, UK/US 1960), a science-fiction thriller based on the novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) by John Wyndham. Born to Earthwomen impregnated by a mysterious alien force, the look-alike children are humanoid but not quite human, with narrower fingernails, an unknown hair group, strange eyes and enlarged craniums (*fig.21*). While Antinea's soldiers are promoted as superior physical specimens, the children have extraordinary mental powers. Lacking in emotion, they exhibit a group mind—what one knows, all know—and often dress similarly, a 'uniform' that differentiates them from other children and underlines both their lack of individuality and the parallels with fascist tyranny. 'Offenders' are brutally and sadistically punished—such as an absent-minded mother forced to scald herself with hot milk—and anyone perceived as a threat is ruthlessly eliminated. Where the soldiers of Antinea are defeated by Herculean brawn and brain, the children are destroyed by a middle-aged male scientist whose maturity and capacity for self-sacrifice proves stronger than their mental facility.



Fig.21 *Village of the Damned*

The fascist cloned soldiers of Antinea are linked with the film's representation of nuclear anxiety, combining the recent struggle with Nazi imperialism and the major post-war threat to world peace. As discussed in Chapter Three, the Cold War tensions between East and West created a global fear of nuclear conflict that reached a peak in the early 1960s. In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, this threat is represented, arguably as the blood of Uranus transformed into 'a miraculous rock which has the power to change all men'. In Greco-Roman mythology, Uranus, or Ouranos, is the sky god, husband to Gaia, the earth goddess. Uranus was castrated by their youngest son, Kronos, the father of Zeus.⁴⁷² From Uranus' spilled blood, Gaia conceived the Erinyes, or Furies, and the Titans, while his severed phallus fell into the sea to engender the goddess Aphrodite.⁴⁷³ *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* dispenses with the finer details of this creation myth, depicting the rock of Uranus as an element of transformative properties that can remake or destroy. The blood of Uranus is equated, by implication at least, with the element uranium, which in turn is associated with the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II.⁴⁷⁴

As Shahabudin notes, by the early 1960s, the long-term effects of radiation fallout were beginning to be apparent.⁴⁷⁵ *The Damned* (Joseph Losey, UK/US 1963) depicts a new 'race' of normal-looking children immune to radiation but themselves lethally radioactive to ordinary humans. This mutation is represented by the establishment as the supreme form of empowerment in a world where nuclear conflict is just a matter of time. As government scientist Bernard (Alexander Knox) notes: 'To survive the destruction that is inevitably coming, we need a new breed of man...my children will go out to inherit the earth.' Unlike Antinea's guards or the aliens in *Village of the Damned*, these children are not inherently aggressive or malevolent, emerging as victims rather than victors. Denied contact with the outside world, they long for parental figures yet see adults only via television screens or as intimidating 'black death' figures in heavy anti-radiation suits. Confined and continually

⁴⁷² Arthur Cotterell, *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (London: Guild Publishing, 1979) pp.146, 152

⁴⁷³ Cotterell, 1979, p.152

⁴⁷⁴ The filmmakers may also have been influenced by *She* (Irving Pichel, Lansing C. Holden, 1935), based on H. Rider Haggard's 1887 novel, where a sacred flame that grants eternal life is explained in pseudo-scientific terms as an unknown and highly radioactive chemical element. In the opening scene, scientist John Vincey (Samuel S. Hinds) announces he is dying of radium poisoning after years of dangerous research and the title character (Helen Gahagan) is killed by overexposure to the flame, in effect a massive overdose of radiation.

⁴⁷⁵ Shahabudin, 2009, p.212

monitored by the British government, only the extinction of the human race will bring them any kind of freedom. On this level, the radioactive children represent, for all their placidity, a form of conquest and domination more absolute than that found in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* and *Village of the Damned*, underlined by the lack of narrative closure.

In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, male subjects who prove resistant to the cloning process grow up with mutated features. Spinazzola suggests this 'blood plague' recalls radiation burns on atom-bomb victims,⁴⁷⁶ the slaves of Antinea displaying prominent facial disfigurements. While a direct parallel is problematic, the association of physical mutation with a mysterious, barely controllable source of power employed for military purposes would have had resonance for many audiences at the time. A liberated slave is vaporised when he stands too close to the stone, again evoking the power of nuclear warfare. Shahabudin gives a very specific reading of this subtext: 'The film's warning that the danger comes "out of the west" presents an explicit critique of US possession of nuclear weaponry, in the context of Cold War paranoia.'⁴⁷⁷ This interpretation seems overly reductive and does not address the Soviet Union's corresponding stockpiling of nuclear arms. Atlantis can just as readily be associated with the USSR: a closed, secretive nation state, hidden from the eyes of outsiders. Hercules asks, 'What has Atlantis to hide which mortal man must not behold?' As with the fascistic threat embodied by Antinea's warriors, the rock of Uranus is countered and neutralised through the intervention of Hercules, who undertakes the ultimate test of his super-masculine potency, stepping into its lethal light and emerging unscathed.

The ultimate embodiment of Atlantean aggression and threat is Queen Antinea herself. On some levels, Antinea is a conventional figure in the *peplum* genre, the seductive matriarch who potentially threatens patriarchal authority and male potency. Günsberg identifies Antinea and similar *peplum* characters as 'bad, sexually desiring women, who also covet power'.⁴⁷⁸ Female characters associated with recreative rather than procreative heterosexuality are usually marked as non-domestic and by implication malevolent,

⁴⁷⁶ Spinazzola, 1974, p.335

⁴⁷⁷ Shahabudin, 2009, pp.213-214. Burke argues that the annihilation of Atlantis and its inhabitants has clear parallels with Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Burke, 2011, p.44).

⁴⁷⁸ Günsberg, 2005, p.121

especially if they occupy social or political positions of power. The *peplum*, as Günsberg notes, tends to associate ‘sexual femininity with extra-domestic, non-patriarchal communities which are gynosocial, or female-led’.⁴⁷⁹ Earlier examples include the Amazons in *Hercules*, discussed in Chapter Two, and the Queen of Lydia in *Hercules Unchained*. In these instances, their spheres of influence are relatively limited and may be contained if not destroyed. The Amazons are not defeated by the Argonauts but remain restricted to their island. The Queen of Lydia commands an army of men but seems concerned mainly with selecting a succession of male sexual partners, who are routinely killed and embalmed as trophies once she has tired of them. Antinea’s ambitions however are not confined to Atlantis or her own sexual appetites and her use of the rock of Uranus threatens the entire world. I suggest Antinea represents above all a disregard for and dismissal of the domestic sphere now associated with Hercules. In particular, her rejection and corruption of the family unit makes their confrontation inevitable.

As several commentators have noted,⁴⁸⁰ *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* draws on Pierre Benoit’s novel *L’Atlantide* (1919), set in the present day, which originated the character of Antinea, Queen of Atlantis, who rules over her lost kingdom in an unexplored region of the Sahara Desert. Tim Bergfelder suggests ‘the novel synthesised a number of themes and motifs that were in wide circulation throughout Europe’, most notably in its representation of the exotic, the Orient and European colonialism.⁴⁸¹ *L’Atlantide* proved an international bestseller, prompting a big-budget French-produced film version, *L’Atlantide (Queen of Atlantis)*, Jacques Feyder, 1921).⁴⁸²

Antinea is marked by voracious sexual appetite and emotional fickleness. Shahabudin states that the character became ‘an icon of early 20th-Century popular culture as an

⁴⁷⁹ Günsberg, 2005, p.122

⁴⁸⁰ Lagny, 1992, p.176; Shahabudin, 2009, p.206

⁴⁸¹ Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007) p.160

⁴⁸² Subsequent film adaptations include the German-French-British co-production *Die Herrin von Atlantis* (Fr: *L’Atlantide*, UK: *The Mistress of Atlantis*, G.W. Pabst, 1932) and the Hollywood-made *Siren of Atlantis* (Gregg Tallas, 1949). An Italian-French co-produced version was released the same year as *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, entitled *Antinea, l’amante della città sepolta* (Fr: *L’Atlantide*, US: *Journey Beneath the Desert*, UK: *The Lost Kingdom*, Edgar G. Ulmer, Giuseppe Masini, 1961). Locating Antinea and Atlantis in the middle of an A-bomb testing zone, this remake eschews the *peplum* film’s subtext of nuclear anxiety, employing the latter theme as a straightforward narrative device linked to the Queen’s apparent death wish.

extreme example of the vamp: the ultimate expression of perverted female desire'.⁴⁸³ The predatory, emasculating female has a longstanding cultural resonance not confined to any particular era or place, though it is possible to identify points where it assumes especial importance. Shahabudin argues that the vamp embodies this concept in particularly concentrated form and 'became popular in the early years of the 20th century as a channel for anxieties about women adopting more independent roles'.⁴⁸⁴ In *Queen of Atlantis* Antinea (Stacia Napierkowskka) is aware of and engaged with fashionable aspects of the outside world that could be associated with the vamp persona, taking delivery of the latest cosmetics and magazines from Paris.

The 1921 *Queen of Atlantis* opens with a long shot of Antinea (*fig.22*), a static portrait that depicts the latter with her body covered and her face veiled, revealing only her eyes, nose and, tantalisingly, her bare left arm and shoulder. To her right is a wild cat, a symbolic expression of Antinea's exotic, alluring and predatory nature that also features in later adaptations. In best vamp tradition, Antinea is associated with aggressive female sexual desire—recreative rather than procreative—and male sexual obsession, driving her conquests to uncontrollable jealousy, insanity, suicide and murder. The unveiled Antinea is costumed and adorned in faux-Egyptian style, seen also in *Journey Beneath the Desert* (Edgar G. Ulmer, Giuseppe Masini, 1961), and there is an explicit comparison with Cleopatra, a prime example of the classical vamp. *Siren of Atlantis* (Gregg Tallas, 1949) invokes the *femme fatale* familiar from 1940s *film noir*, introducing Antinea (Maria Montez) dressed in a black bikini and see-through negligee, flanked by phallic candles and a rope net, suggesting both sexuality and entrapment (*fig.23*). The perverse nature of Antinea's desire is epitomised in a scene in *Queen of Atlantis* where she kisses passionately the corpse of a man murdered for rejecting her advances, an image carrying clear associations of necrophilia.

⁴⁸³ Shahabudin, 2009, p.207

⁴⁸⁴ Shahabudin, 2009, p.207

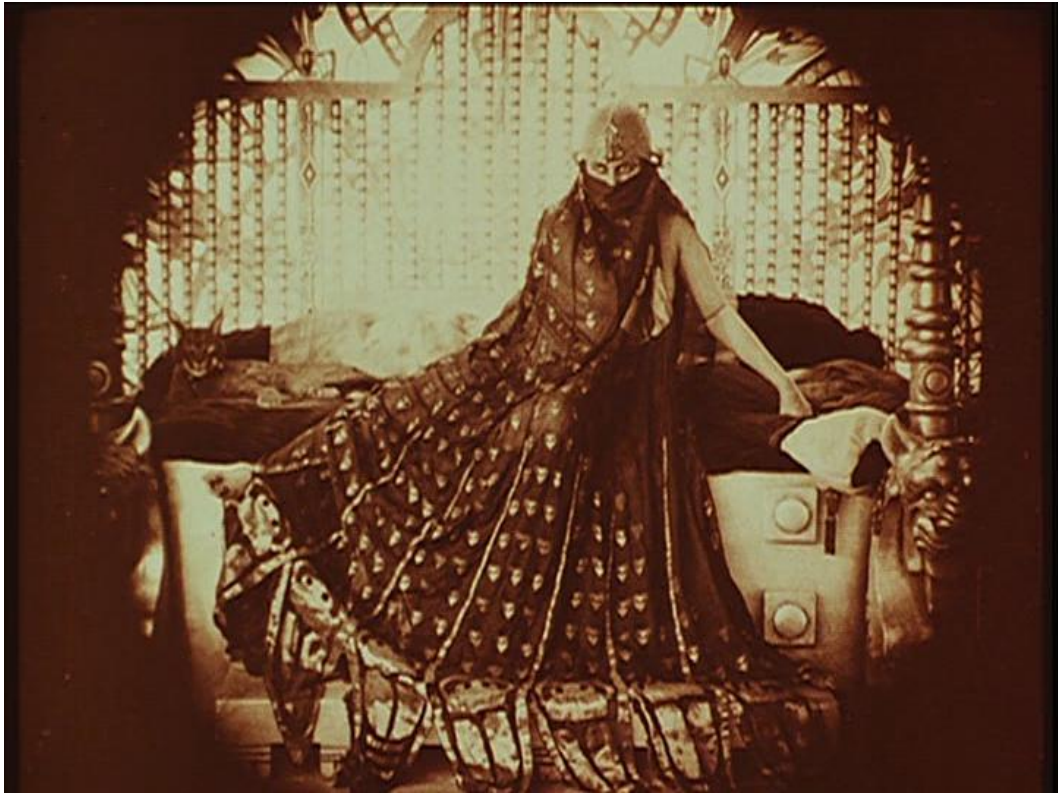


Fig.22 *Queen of Atlantis*



Fig.23 *Siren of Atlantis*

The concept of female desire as ‘perverse’ is found in *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, albeit in different forms. The Amazons choose sexual partners from male visitors for both recreative and reproductive purposes, ensuring the continuation of their matriarchal society from which men are excluded, their temporary lovers and any male children routinely killed. The Queen of Lydia, who commands both female and male subjects, exhibits the same vampish tendencies as Antinea, seeking sexual gratification, excitement and novelty, and selecting the amnesiac Hercules as her new lover once a previous partner has been eliminated. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the late 1950s also marked an era where changing social and economic conditions brought more women into the workplace, permitting new levels of independence, financial and otherwise. I argue that in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* Antinea manifests these changes and associated male anxieties in extreme form, commanding troops and technology that may bring about her domination of the world or its destruction. While the cloned soldiers are linked by many commentators with fascism in general and Nazism in particular, their subservience to the wishes of their queen is at odds with these ideologies, which promoted and idealised masculine strength in mind and body. Downing emphasises ‘the almost exclusively masculine setting of the Nazi party, in which there was not a single prominent woman’.⁴⁸⁵ As Bergfelder notes, a connection between Atlantis and proto-Nazi theories of racial superiority predated the publication of Benoit’s novel: ‘The myth of Atlantis had been instrumentalised since the early part of the century in racist-inflected pulp fiction and crazed socio-historical theories by German authors as a mythical country of origin of the “Aryan race”’.⁴⁸⁶ It is notable that earlier film versions of *L’Atlantide* do not dwell on this concept of Atlantean purity or superiority. Indeed, the idea is barely touched upon in cinematic form until *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*.

The styling of Queen Antinea, in terms of costume and make-up (*fig.24*), could be described as Asiatic, suggesting a conflation of two different totalitarianisms, fascist and communist. This intersects with the cinematic ‘yellow peril’ revival of the 1960s, which foregrounded Chinese criminal masterminds and warlords—ostensibly power-crazed renegades rather than agents of the communist regime—as the major threat to world peace. A prime example is the resurrection of author Sax Rohmer’s Dr. Fu Manchu in the British-

⁴⁸⁵ Downing, 1992, p.20

⁴⁸⁶ Bergfelder, 2007, p.161

West German co-production *The Face of Fu Manchu* (Don Sharp, 1965). While the latter is a period piece, set in the 1920s, later examples located the ‘yellow peril’ or ‘red menace’ in the present day. In *Battle Beneath the Earth* (Montgomery Tully, 1967), Chinese forces are burrowing beneath the United States with a giant laser in an all-too-literal attempt to undermine the Free West. The film opens in the ‘adult playground’ of Las Vegas, suggesting the US risks letting its guard down against foreign aggression, much as the complacent kings of Greece disregard the threat posed by Antinea.



Fig.24 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

The representation of malevolent femininity in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* drew the attention of critics at the time of the film’s release. Writing in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1962, Siclier characterised Antinea as ‘cold and perverse’.⁴⁸⁷ I suggest the queen is represented above all as ‘unnatural’, on social, domestic, gender and maternal levels.⁴⁸⁸ It is notable

⁴⁸⁷ Jacques Siclier, ‘L’age du peplum’, *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 131, 1962, pp.26-38, p.36

⁴⁸⁸ Antinea does not appreciate or respect nature, treating it as something to be controlled and manipulated: ‘We try to subjugate nature to our own scope.’ Hercules articulates his opposition to this view: ‘I am satisfied with nature as it is.’

that Antinea is confined largely to the interiors of her palace and rarely seen in sunlight, equated with nature, the natural environment and, indeed, the only force that can destroy the blood of Uranus. Antinea's subjugation of nature is linked explicitly with her transformation and control of masculinity, most obviously in the case of her cloned elite guards. A US poster for the film constructs the feminine as an unnamed and undefined threat to the hero, with the tagline: 'Could she subdue this GIANT OF A MAN with her SORCERY?' The emphasis on Hercules' size and gender and the unknown woman's supernatural power depicts this opposition in terms of what is natural, or rather nature in its most developed form—a giant of a man—with an unnatural female strength or power that seeks only to suppress and control masculinity. Hercules' best friend Androcles is transformed into a stranger, a spy and a would-be assassin. In one scene, this transformation is, briefly, of a physical nature as his face takes on the blank aspect of the Queen's cloned guards, devoid of emotion and humanity. Antinea also manipulates and oppresses rival forms of femininity, placing the nation-state, and her associated power, wealth and status above her close blood ties to daughter Ismene. It is notable that, Antinea aside, representations of Atlantean femininity are associated with subjugation, entrapment, suffering and death. Female victims of Proteus are both trapped and absorbed into rock formations. Hard yet lifeless, they are transformed into wretched not heroic statues, rigid and inert. Ismene is first seen imprisoned in the same rock, her body not yet calcified.

Antinea offers Hercules the chance to participate in her world conquest, its associated power and, by implication, a heterosexual union: 'together we shall reign over men and gods' (*fig.25*). The Queen of Atlantis also proposes her own version of 'la dolce vita' or sweet life, as represented by luxurious settings and clothes, fine dining and dancing girls, echoing several scenes in the Fellini film. In *La dolce vita*, Rubini is gradually spellbound by Hollywood 'royalty' as represented by American starlet Sylvia (Anita Ekberg), whose long blond hair, low-cut black dress and voluptuous figure embody the desirable yet unattainable feminine ideal in a form that borders on caricature. A seasoned gossip columnist, Rubini is used to mixing with high society yet buys into the illusion of stardom, temporarily at least, in the form of Sylvia. During the scene at the Trevi fountain, he worships her as a near-goddess (*fig.26*), standing close to Sylvia yet making negligible physical contact and nothing that could be construed as openly sexual. The images of the 'divine' Sylvia standing in the gushing waters of the fountain invite comparisons with the

birth of the goddess Aphrodite, or Venus,⁴⁸⁹ born from the same blood of Uranus that possesses rather different creative/transformational properties in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*.



Fig.25 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*



Fig.26 *La dolce vita*

Hercules' relationship with Antinea is both more prolonged and more complicated, though in essence *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* places the good father, Hercules, in opposition to the cruel mother, Antinea, which could be read as a clear example of patriarchy versus matriarchy. There is a suggestion that Atlantis, as represented by Antinea, may overwhelm and subdue even Hercules. His first entry into Antinea's cavernous throne room frames him in extreme long shot, diminished in scale against huge double doors (*fig.27*). This

⁴⁸⁹ One of the best-known visual representations of this creation myth is Sandro Botticelli's painting 'The Birth of Venus' (c.1485), which depicts the goddess emerging from the sea fully grown, standing on a giant shell.

apparent subversion of *peplum* conventions, the hero made small and insignificant, is itself undercut by the camera tracking swiftly to a medium shot of Hercules as he proclaims his victory over Proteus (*fig.28*). Later on, Hercules allows himself to be perceived temporarily as a victim of female duplicity. Antinea offers him a cup of drugged wine, evoking his initial association with appetite and indulgence, particularly in relation to food and drink. Lying back in a prone position, arms outstretched, his body evokes both sexual passivity—Antinea’s plaything—and the crucifixion imagery seen earlier in the film, the demigod martyred to the Queen’s carnal appetite. However, Hercules soon reveals he is wise and more than equal to Antinea’s tricks. Spitting out the wine, he signals a rejection of her decadent ersatz domesticity and empty sexual gratification. Once more, the passivity associated with this Hercules is revealed as a pose and calculated act of pretence. He is not seduced, or even tempted, by Antinea’s advances, unlike Reeves’ Hercules in *Hercules Unchained*, who is enchanted, on several levels, by the Queen of Lydia, losing his masculine potency and indeed identity for a significant part of the film’s running time.



Fig.27 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

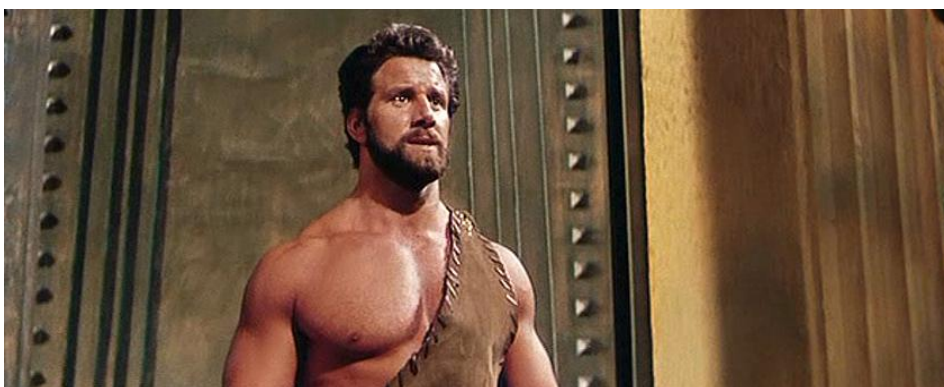


Fig.28 *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*

Park's Hercules rejects Antinea's proposed union, which depends on the suppression and elimination of the younger generation, as embodied by Hylus and Ismene, and a repudiation of the domestic family unit valued by Hercules above all else. It is established early on in the Atlantis sequences that Ismene must die to save Antinea's kingdom and, furthermore, that the queen is willing to pay this price. On one level, male valour and strength are seen to triumph over female guile and malice. However, the opposition between Hercules and Antinea is more than a relatively simplistic gender-based conflict, where virtuous masculinity thwarts, contains and indirectly eliminates powerful yet transgressive femininity. Antinea is also compared with Deianeira and the women are of similar age, both representing mature forms of femininity. While Antinea embodies a powerful yet unsustainable matriarchy dependent on the oppression of men and women alike, Deianeira operates within a smaller domestic sphere that emphasises tranquillity, emotional warmth and, most importantly, mutual respect. Both women are mothers of adult or at least teenage children yet their attitudes to these offspring are at polar opposites, Deianeira nurturing Hylus while Antinea treats Ismene both as material to further her ambitions and a threat to be eliminated. It is notable that Deianeira is dressed in green, equating with nature and harmony, while Antinea is habitually clad in black, matching her hair and eye make-up. Antinea is unable to subdue or seduce Hercules with her sorcery, super-warriors or the rock of Uranus, ultimately revealing her powerlessness. Deianeira has long since drawn Hercules willingly into the domestic realm, as evidenced by the voluntary surrender of his body to her ministrations, his stated intention to forswear foreign excursions, and, above all, the family unit completed by their adult son Hylus and, by implication, new daughter-in-law Ismene.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers an interesting reflection both of *peplum* conventions and the debates and concerns of the film's era, notably a new willingness within Italy to discuss openly the country's recent fascist past.

While the ‘Nazi’ identification of the villains by Italian scholars can be read as a sidestepping or outright evasion of Italy’s own experience of fascist government—and by extension any admission of responsibility or culpability—*Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is one of the few *pepla* to address on any terms the fascist element often linked to the genre. A mainstream film invoking fascism made in a country recently under fascist rule is significant in and of itself, whatever the constraints of this invocation. Critics and scholars outside Italy have discussed the film’s fascist allegory without making a distinction between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, suggesting its approach to the issue is not necessarily compromised by local historical revisionism.

As the vanquisher of fascism, among other things, a Hercules associated initially with passivity, appetite and leisure can be read as a more positive and sustainable construction of masculinity than his predecessor. Reeves’ Hercules, portrayed as a virtuous super-man, exists outside all social and domestic structures and restrictions, his extra-ordinary masculine potency represented as a potential threat that cannot be contained. The Park Hercules retains the imposing physique and super-human strength associated with the character yet is also linked firmly with society, domesticity and family. His opponent, Queen Antinea, represents a rejection of the domestic sphere and embodies in allegorical form a conglomeration of social and historical anxieties, her ‘unnatural’ femininity linked with fascism and the nuclear threat. This extreme manifestation of a *peplum* stereotype—the sexually aggressive, castrating matriarch—is balanced by Deianeira, who represents a domestic, maternal, nurturing femininity which is, however, neither passive nor subservient to the masculine authority of Hercules. As with Julia and Romulus in *Duel of the Titans* (1961), discussed in Chapter Two, Deianeira is represented in terms of equality in her relationship with Hercules.

Secure within his domestic environment and associated commitment and responsibility, Hercules represents an uninhibited and unashamed enjoyment of the good life. If *La dolce vita* and *Accattone* offer implicit or indeed explicit critiques of modern Italy, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* reflects and emphasises the positive aspects, facilitated perhaps by its spatial-temporal distance from contemporary Italy and ostensibly fantastical setting. This could suggest the ‘new’ Italy of the early 1960s, marked by social stability, economic

growth, material wealth, leisure time and domestic contentment, is itself a fantasy at odds with the reality as represented in the Fellini and Pasolini films. Yet both *La dolce vita* and *Accattone* emphasise the personal failings of their male protagonists, suggesting the greatest obstacles to their participation in a good or better life are to be found within themselves. Hercules' external struggles are resolved, unlike the internal struggles of Rubini in *La dolce vita*. The masculine potency represented by Rubini remains eternally compromised and ineffectual on multiple levels: intellectual, moral, physical, spiritual. *Accattone* is described by one character as 'this cardboard man', a flimsy façade of masculinity that has little or no intrinsic strength, bending and tearing under the slightest duress. Hercules by contrast is a powerful, socially integrated male who breaks decisively from the past and any fascist associations, embraces the present as represented by the good life of the new Italy, and offers reassurance for the future, confronting and containing the disturbances produced by political, social and economic upheaval. From this perspective the figure of Hercules, remodelled over the centuries in accordance with the needs and aspirations of a given society or culture, now represents the ideal Italian male and perhaps the ideal Italy in allegorical form. Though not a box-office success on the level of *Hercules*, or even *La vendetta di Ercole*, due partly to competition from other high-profile *pepla*, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offered a representation of Herculean masculinity that was recognised and appreciated by contemporary critics as both at variance with the Reeves incarnation and relevant to wider concerns of its time, domestic and international. These qualities, cinematic and extra-cinematic, are lacking in subsequent *pepla* featuring the character. In my next chapter I will examine a post-*peplum* representation of heroic masculinity in *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982), where the stability and domesticity promoted in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* is ruptured by gender and, especially, racial difference and disunity.

Chapter Five

‘Crush your enemies!’ Post-*peplum* representations of heroic masculinity in *Conan the Barbarian*

My previous chapters have covered a specific and relatively brief time period, from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, addressing issues of masculinity in the *peplum* films *Hercules* (1958), *Duel of the Titans* (1961) and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961), along with the US-made *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), produced partly in response to the Italian genre and *Hercules* in particular. While the *peplum* cycle proved a comparatively short-lived phenomenon, lasting roughly seven years, its influence can be found in films released long after the genre’s decline in the mid-1960s. The emphasis on a heroic or super-masculinity, centred on the exposed muscular male body in a mythical or neo-mythical setting, achieved especial prominence and significance in *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1982), which invokes and echoes the *peplum* in terms of imagery and casting. This American-produced sword-and-sorcery film stars champion bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, regarded widely within bodybuilding culture as the successor to *Hercules* star Steve Reeves in terms of status and celebrity, and its reception drew explicit comparisons with the *peplum*, a point of reference not always intended as complimentary.

Conan the Barbarian emphasises the hard-won attainment of the heroic body and corresponding masculinity. There is however as much variation from the *peplum* as similarity in the deployment of this body. While the majority of *pepla* from *Hercules* onwards depict the hero’s strength in the service of a greater good, *Conan the Barbarian* associates extraordinary masculine potency with individualism and the pursuit of personal goals, whether material gain or vengeance. This strength is also brought into question, Conan depicted in terms of vulnerability and helplessness in several key sequences. I shall discuss *Conan the Barbarian* in the contexts of the character’s origins in 1930s US fantasy fiction and the later *peplum* cycle, both of which drew, to whatever extent, on

bodybuilding culture. The main emphasis of the chapter is on the film's relation to wider issues and debates of its era, in particular those associated with the Reagan presidency. As the dominant force in US politics during the 1980s, Reagan's Republican administration (1981-1989), known as the New Right, promoted ideas and images of white masculine toughness echoed and seemingly endorsed by many American action films, most famously *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George Pan Cosmatos, 1985). *Conan the Barbarian*, and its sequel *Conan the Destroyer* (Richard Fleischer, 1984), can be viewed as part of this debate, alongside the Rambo, Indiana Jones and Star Wars series, high-profile action adventure films in exotic and/or fantasy settings featuring ostensibly straightforward good-versus-evil conflicts requiring violent resolution. There is a notable emphasis on concepts of gender and racial difference, what separates Conan from women and other, non-white, men, with a foregrounding of racial disunity also found in the *peplum* genre in less pronounced form. I argue, however that the apparently reactionary and by extension fascist depiction of white masculine potency and authority is more ambiguous and complex than it first appears.

Unlike Hercules, the figure of Conan the Cimmerian or Barbarian is a work of twentieth-century fiction, with no direct basis in classical myth or history. The character was created by American writer Robert Ervin Howard (1906-1936) and first appeared in a story, 'The Phoenix on the Sword', published in a 1932 edition of the magazine *Weird Tales*, which specialised in fantasy, science fiction and horror.⁴⁹⁰ Born in Peaster, Texas, Howard was a physically frail child and during adolescence took up bodybuilding, achieving an adult weight of over 200lbs.⁴⁹¹ As discussed in previous chapters, the early twentieth century saw industrialisation and urbanisation on a massive scale, followed by an extended period of economic depression in the US, UK and elsewhere. The built muscular physique became a valued signifier of masculine strength at a time when individual male power and potency could for many no longer be equated with social or economic status. Don Herron draws a direct parallel between Howard's cultivation of his physique and the development of his literary characters, led by Conan: 'Near six feet in height, he made of himself a

⁴⁹⁰ Alan Jones, 'Conan', *Starburst* Volume 4, Number 9 1982 (London: Marvel Comics Ltd, pp.20-23) p.21

⁴⁹¹ Don Herron (ed.), *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology* (Westport, Connecticut; London, England: Greenwood Press, 1984) p.xv

prototype for the volcanic muscular adventurers he would write about.⁴⁹² From this perspective, the origins of Conan can be traced, in part at least, to the same bodybuilding culture that subsequently informed the *peplum* genre and, later, the film *Conan the Barbarian*.

Writing as ‘George Knight’, Herron relates the creation of Conan to a wider context of traumatic global change: ‘Howard wrote at a time when civilization was in upheaval. World War I, the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the rise of fascism in Europe and gangsterism in the United States—these factors greatly affected his vision of civilization crumbling before the tides of barbarism.’⁴⁹³ If a supposedly civilised and settled social order was in fact inherently unstable or even unsustainable, the concept of self-sufficient individualism could have an especial resonance and appeal. Fritz Leiber identifies in the Conan stories a ‘preoccupation with feats of physical prowess, with the strong man of fixed purpose whom nothing daunts, with a savagely Darwinian view of life’.⁴⁹⁴ While Conan’s appearance did both follow and coincide with major periods of often violent instability, the image of the lone warrior hero had a longstanding appeal dating back centuries. Steve Eng suggests Howard may have been inspired by a posthumously published Thomas Gray poem, ‘Conan’ (1775), which features a mighty sword-wielding warrior of the same name and attitude: ‘The whole poem, especially the last line, is exactly Howard’s mood as is the subject, down to the very name.’⁴⁹⁵ As Herron notes, however, the popularity of Conan above other heroic men of action suggests he struck a chord with a contemporary, predominantly male readership: ‘The presentation of a “tough” universe was realistic for postwar, Depression-era America. It was a mood or attitude that people could understand, whether they liked it or not.’⁴⁹⁶ Herron even identifies an element of class struggle—and outright warfare—in the Conan stories. Unlike Aragorn in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), who reclaims his kingdom by divine right, Conan represents the common man deposing a corrupt monarch and

⁴⁹² Herron, 1984, p.xv

⁴⁹³ Knight, ‘Robert E. Howard: Hard-Boiled Heroic Fantasist’, *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology*, pp.117-133, p.117

⁴⁹⁴ Leiber, ‘Howard’s Fantasy’, *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology*, pp.3-15, pp.4-5

⁴⁹⁵ Eng, ‘Barbarian Bard: The Poetry of Robert E. Howard’, *The Dark Barbarian. The Writings of Robert E. Howard. A Critical Anthology*, pp.23-64, p.31. The poem ends with the lines: ‘As the thunder’s fiery stroke/Glancing on the shivered oak/Did the sword of Conan mow/The crimson harvest of the foe’.

⁴⁹⁶ Herron, 1984, p.125

claiming the throne for himself.⁴⁹⁷ While this could suggest a radical, even revolutionary political agenda on Howard's part, there is little evidence that the stories were promoted and received by the majority of readers as anything other than escapist fantasy literature.

The mid-1960s saw paperback reissues of Howard's stories, along with rewritten and new Conan material by L. Sprague de Camp and Lin Carter.⁴⁹⁸ Herron notes the 'boom of interest in fantasy and science fiction in the 1960s',⁴⁹⁹ when Howard and Tolkien, among others, found a new readership, especially in the United States. In 1970 Conan was launched as a Marvel Comics character,⁵⁰⁰ ensuring his continual circulation as a multimedia phenomenon. Whatever the degree of fidelity to Howard's stories, Herron argues, the comic strip version 'certainly established Conan as a figure in popular culture'.⁵⁰¹ The continuing and increasing popularity of the sword-and-sorcery genre in general and Conan in particular drew Hollywood interest and the film version was in pre-production from 1976, requiring a lead actor who could render Howard's hero in the flesh.⁵⁰²

Born in Austria, Arnold Schwarzenegger relocated to Southern California in the late 1960s, where he trained under Joe Weider, co-founder of the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB).⁵⁰³ Schwarzenegger quickly achieved celebrity status within bodybuilding circles and won his first Mr. Universe title in 1967 and his first Mr. Olympia in 1970. Producer Edward Pressman, who owned the film rights to Conan, cast him after seeing a rough cut of the bodybuilding documentary *Pumping Iron* (George Butler and Robert Fiore, 1977),⁵⁰⁴ which focused on Schwarzenegger's triumph at the 1975 Mr. Olympia contest, held in Pretoria, South Africa. *Conan the Barbarian* was produced by the

⁴⁹⁷ Herron, 1984, p.129

⁴⁹⁸ The first Conan stories edited by L. Sprague de Camp from unfinished Howard drafts were published in the early 1950s; de Camp also rewrote four of Howard's historical stories as Conan tales, published as *Tales of Conan* (1955) (Herron, 1984, p.167). De Camp served as a consultant on the film *Conan the Barbarian* and, with Carter, wrote the novelisation to accompany its release.

⁴⁹⁹ Herron, 1984, p.xiii

⁵⁰⁰ Paul M. Sammon, 'Conan the Barbarian. Filming Robert E. Howard's Sword & Sorcery Epic', *Cinefantastique* Vol 12 No 2/Vol 12 No 3, April 1982 (Oak Park, Illinois, 1982, pp.28-63) p.31

⁵⁰¹ Herron, 1984, p.174

⁵⁰² Sammon, 1982, p.31

⁵⁰³ Chuck Sipes, 'They Call Him "Sexy" Schwarzenegger Now!', *Mr. Universe* Vol.11 December, 1969 No.9, pp.16-19, p.18

⁵⁰⁴ Sammon, 1982, p.31

US-based Dino De Laurentiis Corporation, with distribution through Hollywood majors Universal (domestic) and Twentieth Century Fox (foreign). Budgeted at \$17.5 million,⁵⁰⁵ the film was shot in Spain from early January to late May 1981.⁵⁰⁶ As with Steve Reeves and *Hercules*, Schwarzenegger's casting as Conan was acknowledged, endorsed and promoted within bodybuilding culture. For example, the July 1980 edition of *Muscle Training Illustrated* ran a cover story entitled 'Coming of Conan'. The film's release was promoted in magazines such as *Muscle & Fitness*, a Joe Weider publication, and *Muscular Development*. The August 1982 issue of the latter featured stills from *Conan the Barbarian* on the front cover, along with a bodybuilder portrait of Schwarzenegger in posing briefs. The coverage also included a two-page feature on the film and a Conan centrespread.

The casting of a bodybuilder in a pseudo-mythological action film brought inevitable and sometimes negative comparisons with the *peplum* cycle. While the genre had died out, many of the films and their associated images remained in circulation worldwide thanks to theatrical reissues and television screenings. Schwarzenegger's mentors included Reg Park, star of several *peplum* films, including *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, discussed in Chapter Four. He made his own film debut in *Hercules in New York* (Arthur A. Seidelman, 1969), a low-budget comedy with an immature, arrogant—and beardless—Hercules at odds with his standard *peplum* representation, despite scenes of javelin-throwing and bear-wrestling. Some time before *Conan the Barbarian* went into production, Ray Harryhausen rejected suggestions that Schwarzenegger play Perseus in *Clash of the Titans* (Desmond Davis, 1981), as 'his muscled physique would have reflected the 1950s and 60s Italian epics, which was an image we desperately tried to avoid.'⁵⁰⁷ As with *Jason and the Argonauts* in the early 1960s, Harryhausen did not want his representation of a mythological hero associated with a genre regarded widely as juvenile, lowbrow and disreputable. A letter to *Cinefantastique* magazine from reader Emily Scanlan suggested *Conan the Barbarian* was fatally compromised by Schwarzenegger and his *peplum* connotations, 'I see CONAN as just more Dino hype, a \$40 million HERCULES. The casting of a bodybuilder... doesn't inspire trust.'⁵⁰⁸ Italian film mogul De Laurentiis had

⁵⁰⁵ Sammon, 1982, p.32

⁵⁰⁶ Sammon, 1982, p.42

⁵⁰⁷ Ray Harryhausen and Tony Dalton, *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life* (London: Aurum, 2003) p.262

⁵⁰⁸ *Cinefantastique*, 1982, p.94. Many fans of the Conan stories and comics were unhappy with De Laurentiis' connection to the film version, as his recent fantasy productions *King Kong* (John Guillermin,

worked in the *peplum* genre, executive-producing *Maciste contro il vampiro (Goliath and the Vampires)*, Giacomo Gentilomo, 1961), not to mention the proto-*peplum Ulysses* (Camerini, 1954). While this suggests a direct connection—and continuation—between the *peplum* and *Conan the Barbarian*, it should be noted that his hands-on involvement with the *Maciste* and *Conan* films was negligible. Writer-director John Milius claimed to be unconcerned by comparisons with the *peplum*, expressing childhood enthusiasm for *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*.⁵⁰⁹

The plot of *Conan the Barbarian* can be summarized as follows: In a mythical Dark Age, the young Conan sees his village destroyed and his parents murdered by the raiders of Thulsa Doom (James Earl Jones), a powerful sorcerer. The surviving children are enslaved and Conan spends years pushing a vast mill wheel in circles, growing into a man of exceptional strength. Sold as a pit fighter, Conan discovers an aptitude for combat and becomes a renowned gladiator. Freed by his master, he joins up with archer Subotai (Gerry Lopez) and swordswoman Valeria (Sandahl Bergman), who becomes his lover. While they prosper as thieves, Conan dreams of vengeance on his parents' killers, identified only by the symbol of a double-headed snake. Having discovered and infiltrated the stronghold of Thulsa Doom, Conan is captured and crucified. Rescued by his friends, he recovers his strength only to see Valeria killed by Doom. Conan and Subotai vanquish Doom's warriors, leaving Conan to confront Doom one last time.

The Making of Conan

Derek Elley, in his study of the epic film, states 'Conan is no more than the *peplum* mythic hero writ large,'⁵¹⁰ echoing earlier comments. This comparison is at odds with the stated intentions of the filmmakers. According to Paul M. Sammon, Milius and production

1976) and *Flash Gordon* (Mike Hodges, 1980) were regarded widely as unfaithful to—and contemptuous of—their source material.

⁵⁰⁹ Sammon, 1982, p.26

⁵¹⁰ Elley, *The Epic Film* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) p.151

designer Ron Cobb felt Schwarzenegger's physique should be covered most of the time, as they did not want to invoke the *peplum* genre's 'bare-chested, muscle-flexing clichés'.⁵¹¹ Schwarzenegger states that Milius, though not averse to *peplum* comparisons, wished to avoid the standard bodybuilder look associated with the genre: 'John wanted me to reshape my body for CONAN. He wanted someone who looked less like a bodybuilder straight out of a gym and more like a man who'd developed his muscles from hard work and even tougher battles.'⁵¹² While Schwarzenegger's physique in *Conan the Barbarian* avoids the glistening, vascularised and 'ripped' look associated with some bodybuilders, for viewers unfamiliar with the finer points of body culture he bears a close resemblance to *peplum* stars such as Steve Reeves, Gordon Scott and Reg Park. Moreover, Conan's torso is on display for much of the film and his muscular arms are rarely covered. In the first scene featuring the adult Conan, as he pushes the Wheel of Pain single-handed, a high-angle shot frames Schwarzenegger's face and shoulders (*fig.1*) followed by a corresponding view of his back (*fig.2*), connoting endurance, determination and above all strength. Recovering from his crucifixion, Conan strikes a series of static poses that emphasise both his skill with a sword and his muscular body (*fig.3*). As with the *peplum*, *Conan the Barbarian* draws on the physique culture that supplied both Reeves and Schwarzenegger. Conan's training as a fighter conveys a growing sense of self-esteem and self-worth—spelt out in the film's spoken narration—that echoes the promotional literature of bodybuilding. The enslaved Conan is seen to build his body, indeed the Wheel of Pain could be read as an extreme form of gym equipment that transforms the boy into a man.



Fig.1 *Conan the Barbarian*

⁵¹¹ Sammon, 1982, p.55

⁵¹² Sammon, 1982, p.38



Fig.2 *Conan the Barbarian*



Fig.3 *Conan the Barbarian*

Where *Conan the Barbarian* differs from the *peplum* is in the treatment of this built body. While numerous *pepla* feature the hero being clawed by wild beasts or whipped by torturers, the punishment of Conan takes the concept of the body under attack to a new level. During the first pit fight, Conan is repeatedly beaten and bitten, blood streaming from his neck. Pursued by wild dogs he falls into an underground cave and lands heavily on jagged rocks, crying out in pain. Tortured by Doom's henchmen Rexor (Ben Davidson) and Thorgrim (Sven Ole Thorsen), Conan is thrown to the ground, his flesh and clothing torn and bloodied. The ultimate assault on Conan's body is his crucifixion on the Tree of Woe (fig.4). While *pepla* such as *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* and *Hercules Conquers*

Atlantis feature imagery that evokes crucifixion, the hero is not literally crucified,⁵¹³ partly because this could undermine his heroic masculine potency to an irretrievable degree. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim note: ‘The crucified body is contradictory...In this image are united passivity and control, humiliation and nobility, eroticism and religious transcendence.’⁵¹⁴ As discussed in previous chapters, there is a long history of such images, whether portraits of the martyred Saint Sebastian or *peplum* heroes put to the test.

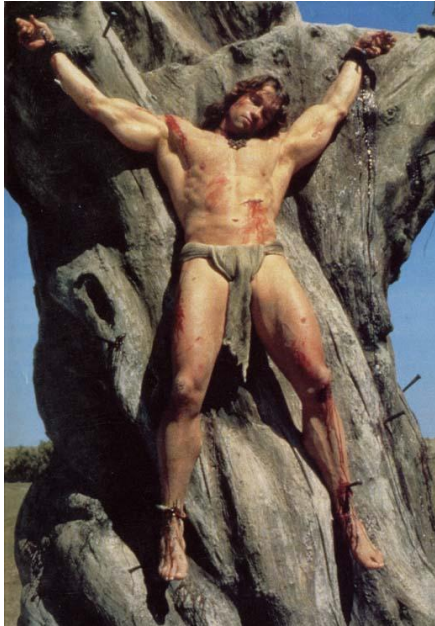


Fig.4 *Conan the Barbarian*

The crucifixion scene in *Conan the Barbarian* can be characterised as contradictory—the muscular, powerful body of Conan now passive and helpless—yet there is little sense of control or nobility. This contrasts with the climax of *Spartacus* (1960), where the gladiator turned rebel surrenders his body in the name of a greater cause: freedom and equality for all men. Conan’s capture and crucifixion can be attributed to an honourable, if self-centred mission—vengeance for his murdered parents and destroyed village—yet are marked explicitly as a consequence of his recklessness and overconfidence. Rather than religious transcendence, in the Christian sense, the figure of Conan is linked fleetingly with Greco-Roman legend. A short scene where a vulture picks at Conan’s flesh recalls the myth of

⁵¹³ In *The Son of Spartacus* (1962), the opening scene depicts crucified enemies of Rome, while rebel hero Randus (Steve Reeves) is *threatened* with crucifixion.

⁵¹⁴ Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (eds), *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993) p.24

Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and as punishment was chained to a rock where an eagle daily devoured his liver, only for it to heal overnight and be eaten anew the next day. Nailed to the tree hand and foot, Conan transcends briefly his enforced passivity and helplessness, biting into the vulture's neck. The sacrifice of Prometheus, who gave fire to mortal men, is reduced to a brute struggle for short-term survival and Conan is denied a mythical heroism, martyrdom and nobility.

The repeated, prolonged and graphic assault on Conan's heroic male body can be viewed in a wider context. There is a case for arguing that the late 1970s and 1980s witnessed social and economic anxieties similar to those of the late 1950s, when *Hercules* was released to worldwide success. Discussing Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* films, the first of which was released two years after *Conan the Barbarian*, Susan Jeffords suggests: 'In the face of a society that is perceived as increasingly technologized, mechanized, routinized, and anonymous, the power of individual decision-making and individual action is drawn as paramount in these films.'⁵¹⁵ *Conan the Barbarian's* representation of rugged, hard-won individualism and independence as expressed through a powerful male body appealed similarly to audiences who perceived themselves in terms of dependence and powerlessness, whether economic, social or political. Discussing Hollywood action films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Yvonne Tasker suggests, "...the enactment of a drama of power and powerlessness is intrinsic to the anxieties about masculine identity and authority that are embodied in the figure of the struggling hero."⁵¹⁶ The conflict identified by Tasker which may be futile or at least irresolvable in real life can be won decisively when enacted in the form of a cinematic narrative. Freed from the enslavement of his childhood and early adulthood, Conan operates on his own initiative as thief and avenger and is answerable to no-one, uncontained and unconstrained by any social structure. His independence comes at a heavy cost, written on Conan's body as multiple wounds, yet ultimately he emerges victorious. This image resonated with audiences both in the US and worldwide. Gianfranco Casadio states that *Conan the Barbarian's* commercial success

⁵¹⁵ Jeffords, 'Can Masculinity Be Terminated?', *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993, pp.245-262) pp.257-258

⁵¹⁶ Tasker, 'Dumb Movies for Dumb People. Masculinity, the body, and the voice in contemporary action cinema.', *Screening the Male*, 1993, pp.230-244, p.243

launched a new cycle or *filone* of fantasy films in Italy,⁵¹⁷ citing seventeen Italian-made films clearly influenced by it.⁵¹⁸ While characterised as sword and sorcery rather than *pepla*, these productions inspired by *Conan the Barbarian* underlined its similarities with the native *peplum*, highlighting once more the spectacle and heroism of the muscular male body in action. Examples include *Hercules* (Luigi Cozzi, 1983), starring Italian-American bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno, a former Mr. Universe and rival to Schwarzenegger who appears alongside him in *Pumping Iron*.

Schwarzenegger's screen persona, which first emerged in *Conan the Barbarian*,⁵¹⁹ has been related to the US Republican administrations led by Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush that held power from 1981 to 1993. Christine Cornea states that during this era: 'The Schwarzenegger body becomes a heroic, nationalistic symbol allied with the Reagan and Bush administrations, a notion that is strengthened by Schwarzenegger's known affiliations with the Republican Party.'⁵²⁰ This association, discussed below, requires qualification in terms of Schwarzenegger's public image during the early 1980s, when *Conan the Barbarian* was produced and released. A declared Republican, Schwarzenegger became a high-profile party activist later in the decade but did not gain American citizenship until 1983 and was therefore unable to vote in a presidential election until the 1984 contest.⁵²¹ Mark Simpson stresses the importance of Schwarzenegger's status as bodybuilder in the mobilisation of 'a new narcissistic but fiercely heterosexual masculinity in support of reactionary formations...the bodybuilder was the fleshy representation of the New Right regressive revolution.'⁵²² While this equation of self-regarding hyper-masculinity with the new rightwing political order can be criticised as simplistic, it is reasonable to say that the Reagan administration promoted itself in terms of a tough, strong-willed masculinity. During the election campaign, opponents of incumbent President Jimmy Carter claimed his Democrat administration had left America a weaker

⁵¹⁷ Casadio, *I mitici eroi. Il cinema "peplum" nel cinema italiano dall'avvento del sonoro a oggi (1930-1993)* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2007) p.165

⁵¹⁸ Casadio, 2007, pp.168-172

⁵¹⁹ Schwarzenegger played co-starring roles in *Stay Hungry* (Bob Rafelson, 1976) and *The Villain* (UK: *Cactus Jack*, Hal Needham, 1979), drawing some critical acclaim for the former, but his characters did not establish a distinctive screen identity and neither film was a commercial success.

⁵²⁰ Cornea, 'Arnold Schwarzenegger', *Contemporary American Cinema*, eds Linda Ruth Williams and Michael Hammond (Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press, 2006, pp.284-286) p.284

⁵²¹ Wendy Leigh. *Arnold: The Unauthorised Biography of Arnold Schwarzenegger* (London: Pelham Books, 1990) pp.100-101

⁵²² Simpson, *Male Impersonators. Men Performing Masculinity* (London: Cassell, 1994) p.24

nation, with 'soft' leadership that undermined the national will and strength and enabled communism to thrive and conquer around the world.⁵²³ By contrast, Reagan and his inner circle portrayed themselves successfully as decisive, dominant and, where necessary, aggressive.⁵²⁴ A former actor, Reagan had been a second-division leading man in Hollywood films from the late 1930s to the late 1950s and his filmography was exploited during political campaigning for the construction of a suitably heroic and tough masculine persona.

As Jeffords notes, Reagan's public image and many popular American films of the 1980s promoted 'spectacular narratives about characters who stand for individualism, liberty, militarism, and a mythic heroism.'⁵²⁵ True freedom was identified with and located in a heroic warrior figure reluctant to fight, but ready and willing to do so where necessary. Jeffords' prime cinematic example is John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, where his frequently displayed physique both resembles and rivals Conan's for visual and thematic significance.⁵²⁶ A Vietnam veteran and escaped POW who returns years later on an MIA rescue mission, Rambo offered a popular representation of recent, traumatic American history. Sidelining the failings of government policy, the film highlighted the belated triumph of the underdog, previously prevented from realising his potential by official incompetence, corruption and lack of nerve. Rambo embodies in pure form the ideals and values that made America great. Reviewing the film for the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Nigel Floyd commented: 'It is Rambo who is seen to be the true embodiment of selfless patriotism',⁵²⁷ an image readily associated with Reagan at this time. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* can be characterised as simplistic jingoism, though the central character arguably resists a straightforward reading. Rambo is an outsider to the American political and military establishment, not to mention society as a whole. While his heroism is valued, the hero himself remains a problematic figure. Floyd notes of the film: 'as these sometimes confused undercurrents suggest, its right-wing ideology is a good deal

⁵²³ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000) p.8

⁵²⁴ Jeffords, 2000, p.11

⁵²⁵ Jeffords, 2000, p.16

⁵²⁶ Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America. Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) p.12

⁵²⁷ Floyd, 'Rambo: First Blood Part II', *Monthly Film Bulletin* July 1985 Volume LII Number 612 (London: British Film Institute, 1985) p.225

more complex and unsettling that it is likely to be given credit for'.⁵²⁸ Kim Newman suggests Rambo can belong only in a prison or a combat zone.⁵²⁹ However, the film emphasises repeatedly that unfettered American fighting spirit would have won in Vietnam, US POWs cheering as Rambo guns down Vietnamese and Soviet soldiers, accompanied by a rousing, triumphal score. In this respect, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* chimed with and provided ideal promotional material for the New Right agenda.

While Rambo was perceived—however contentiously—to fit comfortably and indeed embody the Reagan masculine ideal, this representation of Conan requires qualification. Herron suggests the cinematic Conan lacks the self-sufficiency and associated toughness of Howard's literary creation: 'instead of being a selfmade man, he is captured and sold into slavery as a child; instead of killing his captors and escaping...the film Conan is simply released and driven off into the wilderness'.⁵³⁰ The decision to depict Conan's origins, showing the character as a small, physically slight child dependent on parental protection introduces an element of vulnerability absent from the stories.⁵³¹ Capture and enslavement are not balanced by violent rebellion and escape, the full-grown adult Conan still reliant on the intervention of older, more powerful figures. The problematic nature of the Reagan-Conan association is reflected most keenly in *Conan the Barbarian* with the crucifixion sequence and its aftermath. Howard's story 'A Witch Shall Be Born' (1934) features a scene where Conan is crucified and attacked by vultures, surviving, as Leiber notes, 'by sheer strength and endurance'.⁵³² In the film, Conan also survives his crucifixion but must be rescued by Subotai, a bold thief and brave fighter yet notably smaller in height and build.

This helplessness and dependence is at odds with both Howard's character and other examples of the sword-and-sorcery film genre. In *The Sword and the Sorcerer* (Albert Pyun, 1982), released the same year as *Conan the Barbarian*, the hero, Prince Talon (Lee

⁵²⁸ Floyd, 1985, p.226

⁵²⁹ Newman, 'Rambo: First Blood Part II', *Sight and Sound* Autumn 1985 Volume 54 Number 4 (London: British Film Institute, 1985) p.301

⁵³⁰ Herron, 1984, p.177

⁵³¹ The 2011 *Conan the Barbarian* (Marcus Nispel) also features an origins story—Conan literally born on the battlefield—yet emphasises his extraordinary fighting prowess from childhood, as when a teenage Conan slays four adult opponents singlehanded.

⁵³² Leiber, 1984, p.13

Horsley), also undergoes crucifixion. Unlike Conan, who is barely conscious when Subotai arrives, Talon pulls the nails that pin his hands free from the cross then leads the rebellion against a tyrant king, showing strength, spirit and determination that has, temporarily, deserted his cinematic rival. Following Conan's rescue from the Tree of Woe, he is represented as a passive figure—silent, motionless, helpless—dependent entirely on his smaller, weaker friends for survival. A long shot shows the prone Conan flanked by his protective companions (*fig.5*) and his formerly powerful body is later covered in black clothing that reveals only his injured face and hands, burnt by exposure to the sun. This vulnerability is emphasised further by the assault of the mound spirits, ethereal creatures who seek to claim Conan's body. Only the intervention of Valeria, aided by Subotai, drives them away. The qualified representation of Conan's body and masculine potency is at odds with the images of male toughness and self-sufficiency embodied by Reagan. As J. Hoberman notes, Reagan's media stunts during the 1980 presidential campaign included stripping to the waist and engaging in physical labour, inviting the press to document his well-preserved physique and associated strength.⁵³³ Whatever Reagan's physical frailties in his private life his public persona remained that of the resilient, indomitable male leader, bouncing back after an assassination attempt in 1981. This image was sustained throughout the early 1980s and Reagan merged with Rambo as what Hoberman terms 'the national symbol of a restored national Hard Body.'⁵³⁴ In *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, the hero undergoes symbolic crucifixion twice in rapid succession, tied to a wooden crane, then an electrified metal bed frame. Unlike Conan, Rambo endures the pain *and* retains the inner strength and determination to enable his escape. For all the ambiguities and contradictions of his character, Rambo here conforms to the ideals of the Reagan-era superhero in a way Conan does not.

⁵³³ Hoberman, *The Magic Hour: Film at Fin De Siècle* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) p.207

⁵³⁴ Hoberman, 2003, p.207



Fig.5 *Conan the Barbarian*

It should be noted that Conan is not the only mythic hero of 1980s cinema to be marked by weakness as much as strength and self-sufficiency. Ferrigno's Hercules is also depicted in terms of vulnerability and dependence. While director Luigi Cozzi emphasises Ferrigno's physique, highlighting the star's 'ripped' look, his veins bulging along with his gleaming muscles (*fig.6*), the film stresses Hercules' subservience to and reliance on divine intervention of the most direct kind, as when Zeus prevents the young Hercules from plunging down a waterfall. Like Conan, Ferrigno's Hercules is placed in parental relationships which are ruptured through violence, underlining further a sense of helplessness and impotence. This emphasis on family trauma is a recurrent feature of the post-*Star Wars* fantasy cycle, also featuring in *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), among others. In the case of the 1983 *Hercules*, it perhaps also reflects the political climate in Italy at the time. Paul Ginsborg suggests 1980s Italy was marked by a persistence of the patron-client-based government system and widespread political corruption.⁵³⁵ Promoting and sustaining powerful vested interests, Italian administration took little account of those without wealth or influence, to the detriment of society as a whole. Ginsborg notes: 'The input of the political system to the growth of a culture of citizenship was limited indeed.'⁵³⁶ Servicing the minority over the majority, the privileged individual or group rather than the

⁵³⁵ Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents 1980-2001* (London: Penguin, 2003) p.xi

⁵³⁶ Ginsborg, 2003, p.xi

collective, the Italian government was not only corrupt but stagnant and ‘deeply degenerate.’⁵³⁷

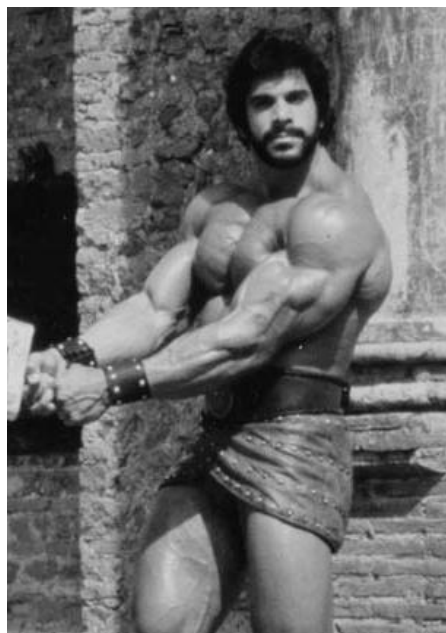


Fig.6 *Hercules* (1983)

While there is no question of intentional allegory or commentary in the 1983 *Hercules*,⁵³⁸ the film is notable for representing masculinity, Herculean or otherwise, as a diminished quality, often self-centred and self-serving, with limited notions of a wider social or moral responsibility associated with traditional values, and little innate potency or authority. The relative weakness of the hero is in marked contrast to his *peplum* counterparts or even the flawed and compromised Conan. There are successive images of Hercules prone and vulnerable. Ferrigno’s body, though large in terms of muscle mass, lacks the sculpted look and often graceful movement of Schwarzenegger’s physique, and his features tend to emphasise the underdog status of his Hercules. While the latter possesses both morality and benevolence, his authority and power are tested repeatedly and found to be inadequate, raising the spectre of male impotence. Even a superhuman can only survive, let alone triumph, through the intercession of higher powers and supernatural forces that transcend all social, political and national boundaries.

⁵³⁷ Ginsborg, 2003, p.179

⁵³⁸ In an email to the author dated 14 April 2009, Luigi Cozzi states: ‘My *Hercules* had no relationship with Italian contemporary society; my movie was just a fantasy tribute to the myth of an ancient legend.’

The depiction of Conan as a manifestation of Reagan-era reactionary masculinity is complicated further, if not undermined, by the film's representation of femininity, as embodied by Valeria (Sandahl Bergman), fellow thief and warrior. The character of Valeria appears in Howard's serialised Conan novella 'Red Nails' (1936), described as 'stronger than the average man, and far quicker and more ferocious', and showing 'a finesse of swordplay that dazzled and bewildered her antagonists before it slew them'.⁵³⁹ In both literature and film, Valeria is not just strong for a woman but has strength surpassing that of a normal male. Furthermore, she has a speed and aggression exceeding those of the average man. Far from being unconditionally positive, however, these qualities when exhibited by a woman can be characterised as problematic and, especially unfeminine. Anne Balsamo suggests: 'To be both female and strong implicitly violates traditional codes of feminine identity.'⁵⁴⁰ Discussing female bodybuilders, Ellis Cashmore suggests they are 'the mightiest transgressors of the traditional feminine ideal',⁵⁴¹ in that they emphasise strength, muscularity, hardness and toughness rather than such stereotypically female qualities as softness, gentleness and fragility. Furthermore, as Anne Bolin states, the female bodybuilder challenges 'the notion that the muscularity that embodies power and privilege is the "natural" purview of men'.⁵⁴² If men cannot claim this muscularity as an exclusively and naturally male trait, their claim on the associated power and privilege is also open to question.

While actor Sandahl Bergman, a trained dancer, is not heavily muscled and remains conventionally attractive and 'feminine' (*fig. 7*), I suggest she shares the 'powerful signifiers of strength, resilience, and activity'⁵⁴³ Cashmore identifies in female bodybuilders. Milius notes of Bergman, 'She's powerful looking. Her body is not just sexy; it is capable of strong movements. You believe she could cut somebody's head off.'⁵⁴⁴ The combination of power, eroticism and violence embodied by Valeria may

⁵³⁹ Quoted by Leiber, 1984, p.10

⁵⁴⁰ Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body. Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996) p.43

⁵⁴¹ Cashmore, *Making Sense of Sports (3rd edition)* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000) p.158

⁵⁴² Bolin, *The Encyclopedia of World Sport*, eds David Levinson and Karen Christensen (Oxford: ABC Clío, 1996) p.52

⁵⁴³ Cashmore, 2000, p.158

⁵⁴⁴ Sammon, 1982, p.26

complement the representation of Conan, yet also transgresses reactionary formulations of femininity and challenges the strong, trained body as an inherently masculine construct. This is especially evident in the scene where Valeria protects the helpless Conan from the mound spirits. Conan's covered motionless body is contrasted with Valeria's exposed, active figure, her hair flowing freely in the wind (*fig.8*). She crouches over Conan's prone form knife in hand ready to defend him with violence. In this sequence, at least, Valeria displaces and replaces Conan as the dominant warrior-protector figure, representing a heroic femininity shielding a compromised masculinity from malevolent forces.



Fig.7 *Conan the Barbarian*



Fig.8 *Conan the Barbarian*

Conan's relationship with Valeria is marked by a tension between closeness and separation. Alongside her abilities as a thief and warrior, Valeria also represents a longing for domesticity and stability, and a sustainable heterosexual union which restricts Conan's ability to achieve his full masculine potential through vengeance upon Thulsa Doom. Conan leaves Valeria alone in their bed, a prime signifier of domesticity, to embark on his quest for Doom's Mountain of Power, abandoning the domestic space in favour of territory marked as predominantly masculine. Having explicitly assumed the price of saving Conan from the Tree of Woe and the mound spirits, Valeria is killed by Thulsa Doom's snake arrow,⁵⁴⁵ a clear extension of his masculine and demonic power. It could be argued that Valeria also pays the cost of assuming—and presuming—the traditionally masculine traits of the warrior, reflecting contemporary male anxieties over economically and socially independent women. A similar, though more marginal, figure is found in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* where Rambo forms a tentative bond with Co (Julia Nickson), a Vietnamese agent who joins him for the POW rescue mission. Aiding Rambo's escape from enemy capture, she shows intelligence, fooling guards by posing as a prostitute, and fighting prowess, wielding expertly an automatic rifle. Having declared her feelings for Rambo—and America—she is killed by the chief Vietnamese officer, much as Thulsa Doom slays

⁵⁴⁵ A similar serpent arrow figures in Howard's Conan story 'The People of the Black Circle' (1934).

Valeria. As in *Conan the Barbarian*, the hero conducts a funeral service for his lost love, places a pendant she wore around his own neck then prepares for battle with her murderer. In both instances, the female with ‘masculine’ traits both challenges traditional gender roles and embodies a domesticity incompatible with the hero’s mission and associated male potency, necessitating her removal from the narrative. Yet Conan remains dependent on Valeria even after her death. During the last battle with Thulsa Doom’s soldiers, she return briefly from Valhalla, clad in shining armour and, by implication at least, saves Conan from Rexor’s death blow. From this perspective, *Conan the Barbarian* implicitly questions the Reagan-era masculine ideal, highlighting Conan’s super-masculine form yet denying him the independence and self-sufficiency associated with figures such as John Rambo. Valeria represents an unresolved tension between a resentment of female ‘intrusion’ into a traditionally male sphere—the non-domestic realm of action and violence—and a tentative recognition of their competence in this field and ability to make a significant contribution. A similar ambivalence is found in the film’s representation of racial difference, which on the surface seems strikingly reactionary if not openly fascist.

White Supremacy?

Reviewing *Conan the Barbarian* at the time of its US theatrical release, critic Roger Ebert expressed reservations about the climactic encounter between Conan and Thulsa Doom, played by African-American actor James Earl Jones: ‘it was, for me, a rather unsettling image to see this Nordic superman confronting a black, and when Doom’s head was sliced off...I found myself thinking that Leni Riefenstahl could have directed the scene, and that Goebbels might have applauded it.’⁵⁴⁶ This invocation of the Nazi-sponsored filmmaker and associated images of Aryan supremacy recalls the response to *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961), discussed in Chapter Four. In the latter instance, the Nazi or fascist connotations are linked clearly with the film’s villains, differentiated from and vanquished by Hercules. Ebert’s critique of *Conan the Barbarian* draws an explicit parallel between the heroic title character and the Nazi ideal, a more contentious comparison. Ebert also

⁵⁴⁶ Ebert, 1982, ‘Conan the Barbarian’ review, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, January 1 1982 (rogerebert.com)

suggests that the film's literary origins invoke a historical context that imbues the scene with specific associations: 'when Conan appeared in the pulps of the 1930s, the character suggested in certain unstated ways the same sort of Nordic super-race myths that were being peddled in Germany.'⁵⁴⁷ While Ebert does not develop this aspect of his argument, he seems to assert that Conan's literary origins both coincided and overlapped with the rise of the Nazi superman, rendering any subsequent representation of the character—in whatever medium—open to accusations of promoting fascist or neo-fascist imagery and ideas.

The prime example of Nazi genocidal doctrine is the systematic extermination of Jewish peoples and it is possible to find evidence of anti-Semitism in Howard's private correspondence. S.T. Joshi quotes a letter to fellow writer H.P. Lovecraft, from January 1931: 'The inevitable Jew infests the state [Texas] in great numbers...No Aryan ever outwitted a Jew in business.'⁵⁴⁸ This statement, though reprehensible by modern standards, is hardly untypical of its time, associating Jews with mass immigration and financial acumen. If the reference to infestation seems in line with Nazi doctrine, there is also recognition, albeit grudging, that Jews are more astute in business than their gentile counterparts. Linking perceived fascist undercurrents in *Conan the Barbarian* with Howard's published stories and the context of their production is problematic in terms of the author's stated views. A letter to Lovecraft from December 1934 describes fascism in markedly hostile terms as 'a sordid, retrogressive despotism, which crushes the individual liberty and strangles the intellectual life of every country it inflicts with its slimy presence'.⁵⁴⁹ Scott Sheaffer notes that Howard perceived the concept of civilisation as fundamentally hypocritical, the author arguing in a letter to Lovecraft, dated 5 December 1935: 'People claiming to possess superior civilisation have always veneered their rapaciousness by such claims.'⁵⁵⁰ Far from suppressing the greed, aggression and lust for power associated with barbarism, civilised societies merely disguised and denied these qualities.

⁵⁴⁷ Ebert, 1982

⁵⁴⁸ Joshi, 'Barbarism vs. Civilisation: Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft in Their Correspondence.', *The Robert E. Howard Reader*, ed. Darrell Schweitzer (Breinigsville, Pennsylvania: Borgo Press, 2010, pp.51-81) p.53

⁵⁴⁹ Joshi, 2010, p.79

⁵⁵⁰ Sheaffer. 'El Borak, the Swift', *Two-Gun Bob. A Centennial Study of Robert E. Howard*, ed. Benjamin Szumskyj (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2006, pp.143-175) p.162

For Howard, the fascist dictatorships that rose in Italy and Germany during the 1920s and 1930s marked the apex, or nadir of this development. A declared anti-Nazi,⁵⁵¹ Howard showed similar contempt towards Mussolini's military campaign in Ethiopia:

It is not, of course, because of any selfish motive that he has invaded a helpless country, bombing, burning and gassing both combatants and non-combatants by the thousands. Oh, no, according to his own assertions it is all in the interests of art, culture and progress, just as the German war-lords were determined to confer the advantages of Teutonic Kultur on a benighted world, by fire and lead and steel.⁵⁵²

Linking Fascist Italy with World War I Germany, Howard encapsulates their 'civilising' imperialist expansion in terms of more efficient forms of warfare, a technologised barbarism. Howard's critique of fascism as a concept dismisses it as anti-individualism and anti-freedom of thought. While his attack on the fascist powers is not explicitly political or ideological, and could be said to sidestep or disregard fascism's more contentious doctrines, to equate Howard and by extension his literature with fascism is both misleading and misrepresentative.

Ebert's comparison may be overly simplistic, not to say misplaced, yet *Conan the Barbarian* is not so easily divorced from Nazi-tainted ideas of the superman. Milius acknowledged the possible fascist parallels and appeared to encourage the comparison: 'Conan would have been a big hit in Germany in the 30s as it is a deeply Nietzschean concept.'⁵⁵³ Milius also compared himself with one of the most famous Nazi leaders: 'I'm the Hermann Goering of my generation. Arrogant, aggressive and barbaric.'⁵⁵⁴ Needless to say, quotations in film periodicals, general or specialist, are not documentary evidence of a filmmaker's intentions, yet the association of *Conan the Barbarian* with Nazi Germany and Nietzsche, famous for his theories of the *Übermensch*, or superior man, seems calculated to provoke the kind of response found in Ebert's review. This strategy is found in the film itself, which opens with a quotation from Nietzsche: 'That which does not kill us makes us stronger.' The credits play over images of Conan's father forging a sword,

⁵⁵¹ Sheaffer, 2006, p.162

⁵⁵² Sheaffer, 2006, p.162

⁵⁵³ Adrian Turner, 'In the Picture: Milius and Conan.' *Sight and Sound International Film Quarterly*, Summer 1982, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp.151-152, p.152

⁵⁵⁴ Sammon, 1982, p.22

invoking arguably the German mythological hero Siegfried and his representations in Richard Wagner's opera, and, more directly, Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924), a film reputedly admired by Adolf Hitler.

The reception of *Conan the Barbarian* evoked repeatedly concepts of fascism and/or Nietzschean theory. Writing in the year of the film's release, Richard Dyer suggested that the film's star already embodied a form of fascism without the need for further historical or philosophical contextualisation: 'The hyper-developed muscularity of an Arnold Schwarzenegger is regarded by most people as excessive, and perhaps bordering on the fascist.'⁵⁵⁵ As with the *peplum* genre, the highlighting and valorisation of the built male physique was in itself an evocation of the fascist ideal. Discussing *Conan the Barbarian* and its imitators, Dyer argues: 'it very often mobilises a sub-Nietzschian rhetoric of the *Übermensch* that, however inaccurately, is strongly associated with Hitlerism and crypto-fascism.'⁵⁵⁶ While questioning the link between Nietzsche's ideas and Nazism, Dyer also suggests that to invoke Nietzsche is inevitably to invite comparisons with German fascist ideology, as the two are inextricably intertwined in the public consciousness. Reviewing *Conan the Barbarian* in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Richard Combs dismissed the Nietzsche quotation as 'of only limited relevance, to devotees of pumping iron', establishing a link between the *Übermensch* and bodybuilding that echoes Dyer's comments yet denying wider political or social relevance.⁵⁵⁷ These assessments of the film's allegedly Nietzschean qualities do not however address its representation of racial difference, which forms the crux of Ebert's critique.

Discussing action films of the 1980s, Jeffords argues: 'masculinity is defined in and through the white male body and against the racially marked male body,' identifying the heroism and individualism valued and promoted by the Reagan administration specifically with the white body.⁵⁵⁸ By implication, at least, these same values are denied the non-white body. Dyer suggests that in situations where white males, usually working-class, perceive

⁵⁵⁵ Dyer, 'Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up', *The Sexual Subject. A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed. Mandy Merck (London & New York: Routledge, 1992, pp.265-276) pp.271, 273

⁵⁵⁶ Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997) p.150

⁵⁵⁷ Combs, 'Conan the Barbarian' review, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1982, Vol. 49, No. 583, p.168

⁵⁵⁸ Jeffords, 2000, p.148

themselves lacking in social or economic power, ‘an assertion of the value and even superiority of the white male body has especial resonance.’⁵⁵⁹ This concept has been applied to the *peplum* and Günsberg concurs that the heroic masculinity of the latter is routinely differentiated from ‘non-white, non-western masculinity coded as “inferior”’.⁵⁶⁰ I will discuss this ‘inferior’ masculinity in the context of the *peplum* below, noting for now that it achieves particular relevance in relation to *Conan the Barbarian*.

Discussing representations of non-whiteness, frequently if problematically referred to as ‘blackness’, Dyer identifies a number of characteristics: ‘Black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things – spontaneity, emotion, naturalness’.⁵⁶¹ These qualities seem potentially positive yet, as Dyer notes, are often read through a male black stereotype, the Brute or Beast,⁵⁶² where spontaneity equates with chaos and violence, and emotions are dangerously ‘primitive’.⁵⁶³ As with the white body, the black body may connote vitality, strength and eroticism; unlike the white body there is a consistent and systematic ‘denial of all that bodily energy and delight as creative and productive, seen rather hysterically...as mere animal capacity incapable of producing civilization.’⁵⁶⁴ Put another way, the strong white body is inherently constructive and civilised, while the strong black body, though impressive in its raw power, is by nature bestial and destructive, capable only of unthinking aggression.

While this perspective on whiteness and blackness is extreme and openly racist, it has some application both to the *peplum* genre and *Conan the Barbarian*. As Dyer notes, black bodybuilders such as Serge Nubret and Paul Wynter, 1960 winner of Mr. Universe, worked in *peplum* films but were never cast as the hero, being relegated to either sidekick or villain roles.⁵⁶⁵ Dyer cites as his prime example *Maciste nella terra dei Ciclopi* (*Atlas in the Land of the Cyclops*, Antonio Leonviola, 1961) and the duel between Maciste (Gordon Mitchell)

⁵⁵⁹ Dyer, 1997, p.147

⁵⁶⁰ Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.118

⁵⁶¹ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies. Film Stars and Society* (London & Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1986) p.79

⁵⁶² Dyer, 1986, p.89

⁵⁶³ Dyer, 1986, p.89

⁵⁶⁴ Dyer, 1986, p.139

⁵⁶⁵ Dyer, 1997, p.148

and Mumba (Paul Wynter), arguing the former's whiteness and his attire, connoting civilisation and refinement, signify superiority over a black opponent clad in a leopard-skin loincloth.⁵⁶⁶ While Mumba's tailored garment—resembling a short skirt—and matching belt and gauntlets suggest a degree of civilisation to match Maciste's wardrobe, his behaviour conforms to the negative stereotypes outlined above. First seen in the darkness and gloom of a cave, as opposed to Maciste's introduction on a sunlit beach, Mumba is a Brute, holding a crying baby upside down while his white master threatens to stab it. Having failed to backstab Maciste, Mumba is overpowered and thrown to the sharks, devoured by stronger animal predators. *Goliath and the Vampires* features a black henchman whose heavy armour includes shoulder pieces that resemble a gaping red mouth with huge white fangs. His helmet and breastplate are also tipped with fang-like spikes, emphasising further his savage, bestial nature. He throws defenceless white women to the sharks and drains their blood into a goblet to feed his demonic master. The character also conforms to the stereotype of black man as sexual threat, menacing a blond white woman in a bedchamber.

Not all *pepla* featuring black characters conform to negative stereotypes, though few representations are unconditionally positive. In *Il figlio di Spartacus* (*The Son of Spartacus*, Sergio Corbucci, 1962), rebellious Roman centurion Randus (Steve Reeves) leads a multi-ethnic band of followers, suggesting racial unity and harmony. During battle, however, he slays many brutish black warriors, most of whom wear 'savage' leopard-skin headgear. *Maciste l'uomo piú forte del mondo* (*The Strongest Man in the World*, Antonio Leonviola, 1961), starring Mark Forest, pairs the eponymous hero with a black sidekick, the equally muscle-bound Bango (Paul Wynter). Though loyal and courageous, Bango is associated with images of captivity (tied to a tree, chained in a crucified position) and passivity, hiding from his enemies while Maciste beats them off and prostrating himself before his rescuer. When Maciste and Bango are forced to fight, the latter is left sprawling and unconscious in the dust. The humorous *peplum* *Arrivano i Titani* (*Sons of Thunder*, Duccio Tessari, 1962) features an unusual, if undeveloped and problematic, focus on racial difference, embodied in the relationship between Crios (Giuliano Gemma), a Titan made mortal, and Rator (Serge Nubret), a slave and eventual ally. Rator is marked explicitly as

⁵⁶⁶ Dyer, 1997, p.162

representing brutish brawn; as Crios notes, ‘It’s like I said, all muscles, no brains.’ Ordered to fight for the entertainment of tyrant king Cadmus (Pedro Armendáriz), Crios demonstrates his superior combat skills against Rator yet proves merciful to his defeated enemy. This compassion is undercut by a shot of Crios grinding his heel into the prone Rator’s hand, the white victor punishing further his vanquished black opponent. The film sidesteps these troubling racial politics to highlight a growing ‘buddy’ relationship that transcends ethnicity, class and the human-Titan divide.⁵⁶⁷ Maria Wyke identifies an alternative, progressive representation of black masculinity in the American epic *Spartacus*, citing the figure of gladiator Draba (Woody Strode). The latter refuses to kill the defeated Spartacus in the arena for the amusement of four wealthy Romans and instead turns his weapon—and his body—against the jeering spectators, dying for this act of defiance. Wyke links Draba with the Civil Rights struggle, suggesting his part in inspiring the slave revolt ‘acknowledges the central role of black activism in the emerging protest movements’.⁵⁶⁸ Yet whatever Draba’s symbolic significance for the revolt, he is denied an active role in the rebellion, let alone a position of leadership. It is notable that Spartacus’ rebel commanders are all Caucasians, and, furthermore, there appear to be no black rebels in his army.

In the US the early 1980s were also marked by pronounced racial tensions, if not the outright civil unrest of the 1960s. As Robert Dallek notes, Reagan had a mixed track record on civil rights: in 1966, the year he became Governor of California, he spoke against the Civil Rights Act of 1964, describing the bill as a well-intentioned but poorly drawn piece of legislation.⁵⁶⁹ During the early years of his presidency, Reagan’s attitude to civil rights seemed less than progressive, in terms of both new legislation and existing law. Steven A. Shull argues Reagan attempted consistently to cut back on federal protections for civil rights, opposing affirmative action and ‘aggressive enforcement of civil rights

⁵⁶⁷ A number of 1980s sword-and-sorcery films follow the *peplum* strategy of giving the Caucasian hero a black sidekick. *The Beastmaster* (Don Coscarelli, 1982) features Seth (John Amos), a muscular, shaven-headed warrior who fights with a wooden staff, which could connote his ‘primitive’ status compared to sword-wielding hero Dar (Marc Singer) or his closeness to nature. The 2011 *Conan the Barbarian* has the seafaring Artus (Nonso Anozie), who acts as an occasional sounding board and spokesman for Conan but otherwise serves little narrative, thematic or symbolic function.

⁵⁶⁸ Wyke, *Projecting the Past. Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997) p.68

⁵⁶⁹ Dallek, *Ronald Reagan. The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984) p.34

laws'.⁵⁷⁰ In January 1982, he was associated with an attempt to prevent the IRS denying tax exemption status to private schools that discriminated on grounds of race.⁵⁷¹ Nor did Reagan give vocal support to an extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which greatly advanced black registration in the South.⁵⁷² When questioned on his civil rights record, he claimed his actions were, as Shull states, 'consistent with his general objective of reducing the scope and intrusiveness of government in all policy areas'.⁵⁷³ Despite this stance, the Reagan administration is rarely characterised as overtly racist. What it did achieve, however, could be termed a form of passive racism through inaction: 'the application of the general antigovernment, antiregulation, laissez-faire philosophy to civil rights issues halted progress and eroded previous gains.'⁵⁷⁴ Though not actively dismantling existing legislation, Reagan's attitude to civil rights was in effect regressive.

As with the debates on fascism, there is a case for arguing that any perceived racist undertones in *Conan the Barbarian* can be attributed to the source material as much as the political or social climate prevalent at the time of the film's production. Herron suggests Howard's fiction offers stereotypical depictions of black Americans typical of his era,⁵⁷⁵ implying the author is no more or less guilty than other writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Sprague de Camp concurs: 'If a racist, Howard was, by the standards of his time, a mild one', the author holding conventional Texan views of Negroes and Mexicans as ethnic groups but praising individuals.⁵⁷⁶ Leiber states, however that the Conan stories in particular are marked by 'a persistent xenophobia...An Aryan-Anglo-American conviction that most of the rest of the world is persistently evil and utterly untrustworthy.'⁵⁷⁷ While Conan is unquestionably a Caucasian hero, Leiber offers few examples of an accompanying xenophobia and does not define his 'Aryan-Anglo-American' grouping to any significant extent. Benjamin Szumskyj identifies a positive representation of a non-

⁵⁷⁰ Shull, *A Kinder, Gentler Racism? The Reagan-Bush Civil Rights Legacy* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993) pp.xiii,3

⁵⁷¹ Dallek, 1984, p.79; Shull, 1993, p.56

⁵⁷² Dallek, 1984, pp.80-81

⁵⁷³ Shull, 1993, p.3

⁵⁷⁴ Shull, 1993, p.105

⁵⁷⁵ Herron, 1984, p.123

⁵⁷⁶ Sprague de Camp, 'Robert E. Howard's Fiction', *The Robert E. Howard Reader*, ed. Darrell Schweitzer (Breinigsville, Pennsylvania: Borgo Press, 2010, pp.24-38) p.27

⁵⁷⁷ Leiber, 1984, p.7

Caucasian in Howard's work in the form of African-American boxer Ace Jessel.⁵⁷⁸ Making his debut in the story 'The Apparition in the Prize Ring' (1929), Jessel is described in the following terms:

He was an ebony giant, four inches over six feet tall, with a fighting weight of 230 pounds. He moved with the smooth ease of a gigantic leopard and his pliant steel muscles rippled under his shiny skin. A clever boxer for so large a man, he carried the smashing jolt of a trip-hammer in each huge fist.⁵⁷⁹

To a degree, this depiction endorses Dyer's comments on popular representations of racial difference. Jessel is defined in terms of his colour, height, size, strength and even the sheen of his skin; his graceful movement is compared with a ruthless feline predator, suggesting a potentially dangerous animalistic quality. While Jessel is described as clever, a trait not normally associated with black stereotypes, this aspect is qualified through linkage with his status and abilities as a fighter; Jessel is a clever boxer rather than an intelligent man, as such. However, the qualities Howard ascribes to Jessel are not dissimilar to those found in Conan and on these terms the portrayal of the boxer can be read as positive, if not necessarily progressive. Sprague de Camp notes: 'Howard's primitivism gave his ethnic attitudes a paradoxical twist. He might view Negroes as incorrigibly barbaric; but...he thought that barbarians had virtues lacking in civilised men.'⁵⁸⁰ While acknowledging Howard's occasional use of 'unsavoury words' in his writings on non-Caucasians, Szumskyj points out the author 'also made many comments about other races that were positive, or at least suggested that all races were pretty much equal.'⁵⁸¹ Jessel's white manager, who narrates the story, is clearly sympathetic towards the fighter: 'Ace was something more than a meal-ticket to me, for I knew the real nobility underlying Ace's black skin...'⁵⁸² If the concept of nobility is potentially problematic, not least through its association with the clichéd 'noble savage', in this context it lends Jessel a humanity, dignity, and morality not found in the Brute or Beast stereotypes. On this evidence, there are tensions and ambiguities in Howard's representation of non-Caucasian characters but

⁵⁷⁸ Szumskyj, 'Cimmerian Gloves. Studying Robert E. Howard's Ace Jessel from the Ringside', *Two-Gun Bob. A Centennial Study of Robert E. Howard*, 2006, pp.199-208, p.199. Sprague de Camp cites Howard's stories 'Black Canaan' (1936) and 'The Dead Remember' (1936) for their favourable depictions of Negro characters (Sprague de Camp, 2010, p.28).

⁵⁷⁹ Quoted in Szumskyj, 2006, p.199

⁵⁸⁰ Sprague de Camp, 2010, p.27

⁵⁸¹ Szumskyj, 2006, p.201

⁵⁸² Quoted in Szumskyj, 2006, p.202

they are neither simplistic nor unconditionally negative or derogatory. This ambivalence is also found in *Conan the Barbarian*.

Though filmed in Spain for an Italian executive producer with a multinational cast and crew, *Conan the Barbarian* can be read as a reflection of racial tensions in early 1980s America. Furthermore this sense of racial and ethnic difference and disunity dominates the film, manifested as antagonism and violence. Conan's first opponent as a pit fighter is a voiceless black 'savage', wearing a mask that obscures his features while emphasising his glowering eyes and snarling teeth (fig.9). Denied personality, this dehumanised figure conforms to the stereotype of the Beast, attacking Conan repeatedly with his sharpened 'fangs'. *Conan the Destroyer* highlights another black villain, Bombaata (Wilt Chamberlain), who serves as a wicked queen's left hand, or *sinister* man. Dressed in black armour, including a spiked helmet, he recalls black henchmen seen in the *peplum* and like the pit fighter in *Conan the Barbarian* fights in an 'animalistic' way, biting Conan's ear during their climactic duel. *The Sword and the Sorcerer* features a black witch, who hisses, wails and chants—but does not speak—in the service of evil magic. Like the pit fighter, she is denied a voice and an identity, being marked as a subhuman figure.



Fig.9 *Conan the Barbarian*

This problematic representation of racial difference was not confined to the Conan films or the wider sword-and-sorcery genre in early 1980s American cinema. Similarly contentious

portrayals are found in the Indiana Jones films, which revived the figure of the white colonial adventurer, bringing justice and order to non-white and by implication inferior peoples. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) opens in 1936 South America, where archaeologist Dr. Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) employs local porters and guides, who prove cowards, traitors or both, and encounters hostile tribesmen, loincloth-wearing savages who fight with spears and arrows and bow down before a gold idol. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Spielberg, 1984), set in 1935 China and India, begins with Jones confronting a group of leering Triads who trick him into drinking poison. While this negative depiction is balanced, to a point, by Jones' Chinese sidekicks,⁵⁸³ the Indian characters are impoverished, pleading villagers; physically unattractive aristocrats who dine on monkey brains; or demon-worshipping, child-abusing thugs who practice human sacrifice. Presented with little discernible critical distance or sense of irony, these images of non-Caucasians perpetuate discredited stereotypes regarded widely as unacceptable in mainstream western cultures.⁵⁸⁴ It is notable that Ebert, who dwells at some length on the inferred racial politics of *Conan the Barbarian*, makes no comment on the representation of Chinese and Indian peoples in his review of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Perhaps depictions of these ethnic groups—negative or otherwise—did not have the same perceived resonance or relevance in the US as those of African-Americans during this era.⁵⁸⁵

Thulsa Doom is a more complex figure than either the pit fighter or Bombaata, conforming to some negative black stereotypes yet subverting others to a significant degree. A sorcerer linked with the supernatural, Doom also represents technology, in the form of armour and steel weaponry. Intelligent and thoughtful, he stands for strength and leadership, commanding thousands of white followers. This representation of blackness is hardly progressive, given Doom's association with unnatural, destructive and therefore

⁵⁸³ An adult male, who is quickly killed off, and a boy who serves as Jones' primary companion in adventure for the duration of the film.

⁵⁸⁴ Chattar Lal (Roshan Seth), the Oxford-educated Prime Minister of Pankot, claims the British make Indians feel like 'well cared-for children', suggesting a tentative critique of imperialism and colonialism. Yet Lal is revealed as a leading member of the Thuggee cult; even the finest Western education and culture cannot alter his inherently savage and bloodthirsty nature.

⁵⁸⁵ Todd McCarthy's review for trade journal *Variety* also fails to mention this aspect of the film. In the UK, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* was similarly quiet on the issue, but an unsigned capsule review in *Sight and Sound* noted how the film was 'saddled with uncomfortable racist attitudes' (Penelope Houston, ed., *Sight and Sound* Autumn 1984 Volume 53 No.4 (London: BFI, 1984) p.308)

illegitimate sources of power. It is however a departure from the simplistic 'brutes' or 'beasts' found elsewhere in the Conan films and the earlier *peplum* cycle. Doom's transformation into a giant snake suggests he is both subhuman, not so much animalistic as animal, and super-human, a shape-shifter transcending the physical restrictions that bind ordinary men, much as Conan transcends the limitations of the regular body. In terms of Christian mythology, his association with the snake is satanic, as in the Garden of Eden, while Greco-Roman myth has the infant Hercules attacked by two serpents, strangling them with his bare hands.⁵⁸⁶ Snake men appear in Howard's King Kull story 'The Shadow Kingdom' (1929), among others, and Dennis Rickard suggests 'they illustrate that Howard saw in serpentine beings the incarnation of evil'.⁵⁸⁷ Doom's association with snake imagery, not to mention his phallic tower, could also invoke the stereotype of the Black Stud, signifying inexhaustible and insatiable sexual potency. Yet Doom is an asexual figure; presiding over a vast orgy chamber, he remains a passive spectator and his acquisition of 'children' is achieved through other means. Doom represents a form of perverted, racially-tinged patriarchy,⁵⁸⁸ brainwashing the children of wealthy and powerful Caucasians into abandoning and, sometimes, murdering their parents, and presenting himself as their new father.

A parallel can be drawn between Thulsa Doom and the figure of Kurtz, originally featured in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) but later reconfigured as a rogue Vietnam colonel in *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Coppola, 1979), co-scripted by Milius. While Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) is Caucasian, his representation in *Apocalypse Now* is not dissimilar to that of Doom. Based in a remote, secret location, accessible only via a perilous route, Kurtz commands a private army and is worshipped as a near-god. Government agent Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), sent to eliminate Kurtz, discovers he has a seductive power over all men, having turned a previous would-be assassin into a devoted follower. Kurtz's Cambodian encampment, based around an ancient temple, is dominated by crucifixion imagery and dismembered body parts. Kurtz commands both

⁵⁸⁶ *The Sword and the Sorcerer* also equates snakes and serpentine imagery with a supernatural villain.

⁵⁸⁷ Dennis Rickard, 'Through Black Boughs: The Supernatural in Howard's Fiction', *The Dark Barbarian*, pp.65-85, p.82

⁵⁸⁸ Other actors considered for the role of Thulsa Doom include Sean Connery (Sammon, 1982, p.37). From this perspective, the casting of Jones could be considered 'colour blind', his ethnicity not an issue for the filmmakers, yet the representation of his character makes a corresponding colour blindness on the part of the viewer problematic.

American and Asian followers, referred to as his children, invoking and subverting the reactionary image of the white man as benevolent colonial patriarch.

The depiction of Kurtz's body makes for an interesting comparison with Thulsa Doom. While Doom is off-screen for much of *Conan the Barbarian*, he appears and is clearly seen in the early sequence where Conan's village is raided and destroyed. For much of *Apocalypse Now*, Kurtz is represented only in the form of photographs, audio recordings, classified US Army dossiers and Willard's reaction to this material. The first shot of Kurtz himself, over two hours into the film,⁵⁸⁹ places him to the right of the frame, lying on a bed in shadow, only his right forearm clearly visible. Later shots show only fragments of his body seen by lamplight, his face remaining obscured. When Kurtz' face is finally seen, it is suffused in a golden light, contrasted with the surrounding darkness, suggesting a supernatural quality. While he lacks Doom's shape-shifting abilities, Kurtz has a similarly fragmented, vague, undefined and uncanny body that contrasts with the lean, muscular, frequently exposed form of Willard, whose physique connotes training, discipline and integrity. As in *Conan the Barbarian*, these opposed bodies are eventually brought into physical conflict that leaves one of them not just defeated but taken apart, ruptured and violated with a metal blade. While Kurtz is a white man killed, or assassinated, by another white man, Conan's slaying of Thulsa Doom invokes the racial dimension highlighted by Ebert, suggesting an equation of whiteness and blackness with good and evil.

In terms of debates on blackness, the casting of James Earl Jones as Thulsa Doom is of particular interest given his role as the voice of Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983). Jones' own body is absent from the screen, his vocal performance coupled with a humanoid yet robotic form⁵⁹⁰ that is both literally black and conveys many of the negative qualities associated with blackness. First seen emerging from a shadowed doorway, Vader is characterised largely by components of his costume: a cape, body armour, helmet and mask, his eyes rendered as impenetrable blank spaces. The hard

⁵⁸⁹ The *Redux* version of the film, released in 2000, delays Kurtz' entrance even longer but features additional scenes with the character.

⁵⁹⁰ The Darth Vader costume is worn, for the most part, by white British actor David Prowse, also a weightlifter and bodybuilder.

surfaces and edges of this ‘body’ convey a lack of both humanity and humanness, underlined by a harsh, rasping breathing and a mechanically or electronically distorted voice which while sometimes impassioned is like a parody of a standard emotional register. Similarly, his robotic or cyborg components represent a form of built body marked as artificial and unnatural, as opposed to the ‘legitimate’ built body of Conan. Vader’s costume is contrasted with those of rebels Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) and Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher), whose white or light-coloured garments in the first film are a conventional marker of heroism and virtue, while his former master Obi Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) is dressed in similarly light colours or a shade of brown that connotes nature and serenity. Like Thulsa Doom, Vader commands a supernatural power, the mysterious Force, which enables, among other things, telepathic and telekinetic abilities. The blackness associated with Vader is employed to reinforce his depiction as inhuman, soulless and malicious, though the simplistic nature of this non-white Otherness is qualified to an extent by narrative and thematic developments in the later films.

Doom’s relationship to Conan is ultimately that of the Bad Father, seeking to displace and replace Conan’s actual father, killed many years before. It is notable that Doom claims—and usurps—credit for Conan’s hard-won acquisition of super-masculine potency, both physical and mental: ‘Look at the strength of your body, the desire in your heart. *I* gave you this!’ Far from being independent, self-sufficient and, above all, self-made, Conan has been moulded from childhood under Doom’s guidance. As the object of Conan’s long-planned revenge, Doom is also his inspiration and, it seems, benefactor. In their final meeting, he makes this assumed paternal relationship explicit: ‘For who now is your father if it is not me?’ Doom places his hand on Conan’s shoulder, both a reassuring gesture and their first physical contact, while the latter’s expression reveals a new uncertainty (*fig. 10*). The background of the frame shows Conan poised between dark and light, while Doom’s hand emerges from darkness into light, underlining the ambiguity of their relationship and the uncertainty of the correlation of white and black with good and evil. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Darth Vader claims actual paternity of Luke Skywalker, who though initially appalled and disbelieving soon acknowledges this relationship. The opposing figures of darkness and light, the artificial body and the natural body—in an early scene Skywalker is dressed only in a white loincloth—are revealed to be kinsmen, linked irrefutably on one of the closest familial levels. However, when Vader is redeemed at the climax of *Return of*

the Jedi, his mask is removed to reveal a white face (Sebastian Shaw). This reclamation from the forces of darkness, or blackness, is accompanied by a change in name, Vader becoming Anakin Skywalker, and costume, the black armour replaced by the Jedi robes associated with Kenobi. Furthermore, the unmasked Vader is voiced by Shaw, removing Jones (and Prowse) from the film's diegesis along with all other traces of Vader's malevolent nature.



Fig.10 *Conan the Barbarian*

Conan's decapitation of Doom could be read as repudiating the latter's claim of fatherhood and reaffirming the separation and antagonism of white and black. I argue *Conan the Barbarian* does not resolve this opposition in the straightforward manner of the *Star Wars* films. The transformation of Conan the boy into Conan the Barbarian is dependent on his relationship, however antagonistic, with Thulsa Doom, who teaches him forcibly how the strength of the flesh as represented by Conan's body is the ultimate expression and affirmation of extraordinary masculine potency. Doom's own body, usually clothed and subject to supernatural transformation, is supplanted by the naturally built, mature, fixed body of Conan, tested on numerous occasions. While Conan establishes his legitimate ownership of this body, its creation from the Wheel of Pain to the Mountain of Power lies as much with Thulsa Doom. From this perspective, Conan is indeed a child of Doom who replaces the father figure with the latter's tacit approval and acceptance, the racial—and racist—divide identified by Ebert shown as neither fixed nor impermeable, let alone morally absolute.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the relationship between the *peplum* genre and *Conan the Barbarian*, which invokes and echoes the earlier cycle in terms of imagery and casting, centred on the heavily muscled and exposed male body. Originating in 1930s pulp fiction that like the *peplum* drew on bodybuilding culture, the film also intersects with ideas of white male strength and toughness in circulation at the time of its production and release. Associated with Reagan-era America, these concepts can be termed reactionary and even fascist in their construction of gender and, especially, racial difference. While *Conan the Barbarian* offers a depiction of tough white male individualism and heroism comparable with that found in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, it also emphasises a masculine vulnerability and dependence at odds with the Reaganite hero. Furthermore, the film's constructions of gender and racial difference, though contentious, are more ambiguous and complex than those found in the *Rambo*, *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones* films. Despite Conan's ultimate victory over Thulsa Doom, white masculinity is revealed as a problematic, troubled construction, while femininity and non-whiteness, though coded as Other,⁵⁹¹ are recognised as qualities important to the survival and development of masculinity, and the realisation of its potential.

The tensions and contradictions found in the representation of gender and racial difference in *Conan the Barbarian* are addressed and, to a degree, resolved in *Conan the Destroyer*. The sequel features a black, female sidekick, the bandit Zula (Grace Jones), who has 'animalistic' qualities associated with black stereotypes, displaying a fierce snarl, wearing

⁵⁹¹ There is also the need to make Schwarzenegger's body appear less 'other' in comparison to his co-stars, something common to *Conan the Barbarian* and *Conan the Destroyer*, and many of his later films. One approach is to cast performers who match or even surpass Schwarzenegger in terms of size and build, such as Ben Davidson, an American football player, and Sven Ole Thorson, a bodybuilder and karate expert, in *Conan the Barbarian*. Another strategy is to use non-Caucasian actors in prominent roles, notably James Earl Jones and Wilt Chamberlain in the Conan films (other examples include African-American actor Bill Duke, who plays a villain in *Commando* (Mark L. Lester, 1985) and one of Schwarzenegger's rescue team in *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987)). By casting those more apparently other in ethnicity alongside Schwarzenegger, it lessens the degree to which his Austrian nationality and built musculature is itself other.

a fur tail and revealing herself—in the abstract—as a ruthless sexual predator. However, her prowess in combat and exposed, unarmoured body give her immediate kinship with Conan, who treats Zula as an equal and makes an explicit comparison with his lost love Valeria: ‘She has the same spirit.’ It is notable that the relationship between Conan and Zula remains that of companions in adventure, with no hint of a romantic liaison. When Conan’s white male sidekick Malak (Tracey Walter) makes inept amorous advances towards Zula, she shows disdain for his overtures and the scene is played for comedy. In this instance the division between white and black remains distinct. However, Zula is permitted to retain her status as a warrior, her assumption of masculine traits not incurring the same fate, or punishment, as Valeria in *Conan the Barbarian*.

Contrasted with the treacherous Bombaata, Zula represents loyalty and integrity. At the film’s conclusion, she separates from Conan, accepting a position as head of the newly crowned queen’s guard, incorporated into a social order that channels her fighting skills and aggressive tendencies into a socially ordained and constructive role. Proven ability and strength of character transcend ethnic difference and, on this level, racial boundaries and tensions are eliminated. There are of course limitations to this representation of black femininity. Unlike Thulsa Doom, Zula presents no challenge or threat to a white-dominated patriarchy, and accepts without question her subordinate position to Conan for the purposes of their quest. Yet however qualified or compromised, her depiction is positive and arguably even progressive compared to representations of blackness in later films exploring racial difference in a mythical or classical setting. The relationship between the idealised, heroised white male body and the ‘alien’, antagonistic non-white body also features in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007). While *Conan the Barbarian* suggests an uneasy, unresolved interrelationship between white hero and black villain, the former unable to realise his potential without the latter, *300* insists on a total separation of white and black. It is this multi-layered schism which I address in the next chapter.

Chapter Six

The Mighty Sons of Hercules: Heroic Masculinity and the Spartan Warrior in *300*

This chapter examines the representation of the male body in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007), an American-produced action film that restages the historical Battle of Thermopylae, pitting Spartan against Persian. Based on a serialised comic book, *300* locates its debates on masculinity in the exposed muscular physiques of the Spartan heroes, evoking bodybuilding culture, the *peplum* genre and the 1980s sword-and-sorcery cycle, factors reflected in the film's reception. Rather than follow the strategy of casting bodybuilders, such as Steve Reeves or Arnold Schwarzenegger, *300* employs actors whose gym-conditioned physiques were enhanced further in post-production with digital technology, a different form of body building. Unlike the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery films, *300* emphasises a collective form of heroic masculinity, led by Spartan king Leonidas (Gerard Butler), rather than a lone warrior figure whose extraordinary masculine potency is represented as something unique. The film could thus be seen as depicting heroic manliness as a more egalitarian quality, attainable for all through hard work and dedication. However, from its opening scene *300* stresses Spartan masculinity as a privileged, elitist quality available only for the select few.

The film also highlights an associated commitment to self-sacrifice in the name of a greater good, political, national and ideological. This potentially positive aspect is linked with fascist or neo-fascist undercurrents identified, however contentiously, in the *peplum* and *Conan the Barbarian*, yet here presented in more problematic form. It is notable that press reception for *300* centred not so much on whether these fascist elements were present, taking this as a given, but if their presence was a matter of consequence that merited serious debate. I argue that while *300* is by far the most recent film discussed in this thesis, it is also the most reactionary in its foregrounding of difference, what separates Spartans from other men. There is an emphasis on physical and racial disunity that while found in

the *peplum* genre and, especially, *Conan the Barbarian*, is here constructed as a total and unqualified schism between white perfection, coded as superior, and non-perfect and non-white, coded as inferior.⁵⁹² Promoted and received as playing with Nietzschean concepts of the superior man, implicitly white, *Conan the Barbarian* depicts tensions, ambiguities and interdependence between white and black that are neither clear-cut nor readily resolved. *300* represents this difference as crucial, fundamental and straightforward: Spartan whiteness is equated with heroism, nobility, discipline, loyalty, democracy and sacrifice; physical imperfection and, above all, blackness are shorthand for aggression, treachery, cowardice, degeneracy, decadence and effete-ness. This depiction is especially problematic given the film can be viewed in a broader context, engaging with issues and debates of its era, in particular the post-9/11 tensions and open warfare between West and (Middle) East. *300* appears to subscribe, unconditionally and uncritically, to reactionary depictions of white masculine potency and authority, the Spartan body contrasted with and held as superior to the Non-Spartan body.

300 was adapted from a graphic novel by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, first published in five instalments in 1998 and 1999. Miller was inspired by the Hollywood film *The 300 Spartans* (Rudolph Maté, 1962), released by Twentieth Century-Fox during the era of large-scale Hollywood historical epics and more modestly produced Italian *pepla*. This second-division epic⁵⁹³ recounts the battle at Thermopylae in 480BC, between a small Spartan force led by King Leonidas (Richard Egan) and the vast Persian army commanded by King Xerxes (David Farrar). Paul Cartledge characterises the Spartans as ‘the Dorian (Doric-speaking) inhabitants of a Greek citizen-state in the Peloponnese that for many centuries was one of the greatest of ancient Greek powers.’⁵⁹⁴ While space does not permit a detailed account of Spartan culture, it is worth noting that the upper-class members of this Greek state claimed direct descent from Hercules, the Greco-Roman demigod. Tom

⁵⁹² This racial/ethnic divide does not reflect recorded history. As Paul Cartledge notes, at the time of Thermopylae, in 480BC, the Persian empire extended to the Aegean sea and included Greek states such as Thebes, whose soldiers fought in Xerxes’ army (Cartledge (ed.), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp.67, 173, 174). Ernie Bradford states that Macedonia, Thessaly, Boeotia and Thrace were also allied to Persia (Bradford, *The Year of Thermopylae* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980) pp.91, 165, 167, 211).

⁵⁹³ Though released by a major studio, the film features two ‘B’-list American leads, Richard Egan and Diane Baker, and a largely British supporting cast, of whom only Ralph Richardson had any international standing.

⁵⁹⁴ Cartledge. *Thermopylae. The Battle That Changed the World* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan, 2006) p.203

Holland states that, around 700BC, ‘the Spartan elite began to manufacture an ancestry for itself that stretched back to the greatest hero of them all, Heracles,⁵⁹⁵ slayer of monsters and son of Zeus’.⁵⁹⁶ The adjective Heraclid refers to a person who claims such ancestry, especially the Dorian aristocrats of Sparta.⁵⁹⁷ The name Leonidas means ‘lion’s son’, linking the King further with Hercules and the latter’s famous lion skin. The site of the battle of Thermopylae (literally ‘hot gates’) lay close to the mountain peak where the fatally poisoned Hercules burned himself on a funeral pyre, surrendering his corporeal form to join the gods on Olympus.⁵⁹⁸ Claiming the bloodline of Hercules as its own, Sparta could also lay claim to the extraordinary masculinity associated with the mythical hero. As the historical Spartans proclaimed themselves descendents of Hercules, so *300*’s depiction of heroic masculinity has roots in the *peplum* representation of the heroic body first seen in the 1958 *Hercules*. However, the creation, presentation and meaning of this Spartan body are in several ways significantly different.

Any discussion of *300* in terms of its depiction of the male physique must acknowledge the film’s use of digital technology to manipulate these exposed bodies to achieve the desired look. Publicity stressed how long and hard the actors worked out to build their physiques, evidenced in behind-the-scenes footage included on the DVD and Blu-ray releases (*fig. 1*).⁵⁹⁹ However, this relatively short-term regime stands in contrast to the thousands of hours necessary for developing the musculature of a champion bodybuilder such as Reeves or Schwarzenegger. The use of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) on *300*’s Spartan bodies can be classed as enhancement rather than radical alteration yet plays an important and visible role in the end result (*fig. 2*). On the DVD/Blu-ray commentary, Zack Snyder discusses the use of CGI in relation to the shields, armour and weapons, mostly plastic props required to look metallic: ‘They put a finish on all that stuff when we perfected the film the way it is’;⁶⁰⁰ I argue this comment is applicable equally to the physiques of the Spartan actors. Leonidas’ torso has a sculpted and bronzed look, clearly defined and highlighted, muscles gleaming beneath the sweat and dirt of battle. The Spartan body may

⁵⁹⁵ The Greek version of the name is usually rendered as Herakles or Heracles.

⁵⁹⁶ Holland, *Persian Fire. The First World Empire and the Battle for the West* (London: Little, Brown, 2005) p.68

⁵⁹⁷ Marian Makins (ed.), *Collins English Dictionary* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1995) p.726

⁵⁹⁸ Holland, 2005, p.259

⁵⁹⁹ *300* (Warner Bros. Entertainment UK Ltd 2007)

⁶⁰⁰ *300* (Warner Bros. Entertainment UK Ltd 2007)

lack the hyper-muscularity of the bodybuilder physique yet connotes clearly comparable training, discipline, strength and resolve. Suzanne Turner notes how the depiction of these bodies ‘plays on similarities between the male body and body armour,’⁶⁰¹ and the use of CGI further to contour and ‘harden’ the Spartan physique emphasises this body as its own protective barrier against assault and penetration.



Fig.1 300's Spartan warriors prior to their CGI enhancement

⁶⁰¹ Turner, ““Only Spartan Women Give Birth to Real Men”: Zack Snyder’s 300 and the Male Nude”, *Classics for All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture*, eds Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp.128-149) pp.142-143



Fig.2 300

Giovanna Fossati defines CGI as ‘the process by which scenes are, partially or entirely, generated in the digital domain via dedicated 3D computer graphics’.⁶⁰² While CGI effects are not always intended to be read as realistic, their use in mainstream narrative feature films is usually designed to blend with the live-action elements recorded on 35mm film or high-definition digital video. Stephen Keane states that ‘effects essentially generated within computers have successfully or otherwise been integrated into the familiar palette and parameters of the photographic.’⁶⁰³ The end result is intended to be perceived as a unified whole, a single image, rather than a disparate assembly of photographic and digital elements. As Keane suggests, CGI aims to capture not realism but photorealism, what Lev Manovich terms ‘the ability to fake not our perceptual and bodily experience of reality but only its photographic image’.⁶⁰⁴ From this perspective, a CGI component of an image is judged successful if it is indistinguishable from or perceived to merge seamlessly with the photographed elements. Damian Sutton concurs that ‘CGI, particularly that used to create

⁶⁰² Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel. The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009) p.40

⁶⁰³ Keane, *CineTech: film, convergence and new media* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.56

⁶⁰⁴ Quoted in Fossati, 2009, p.40

fantastic worlds of science fiction or historical worlds of the romantic past, constantly relies upon the appearance of these as having been filmed.⁶⁰⁵ A CGI effect may be spectacular or fantastical but its origins as computer-modelled software must be disguised. Computer-generated effects have been employed in feature films since the 1970s, an early example being *Westworld* (Michael Crichton, 1973), which uses the technique to convey a robot's point of view.⁶⁰⁶ Keane cites *The Abyss* (James Cameron, 1989) as the film that 'first demonstrated the photorealistic potential of CGI'.⁶⁰⁷ More recently, digital effects were used extensively in the classical epics *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004), mainly to create buildings, backdrops and additional extras in crowd and battle scenes. For *Gladiator*, the face of actor Oliver Reed was grafted digitally onto the body of a stand-in after Reed's sudden death midway through production. *300* employs digital effects in many shots, with most of the backdrops and a number of supporting characters generated entirely through CGI. It should be noted that, since the early 1990s, many Hollywood feature films made in 35mm, including *300*, have undergone what Holly Willis terms 'a digital intermediate process when the film stock is digitised and then edited and altered in extensive digital post-production before being output again to 35mm as a 'film''.⁶⁰⁸ In these instances, at least, the digitisation of film amounts to far more than the use of CGI effects, being an integral part of the filmmaking process.

In the case of the Spartan warriors, the CGI enhancement deployed for *300* could be viewed as a complementary method of achieving the heroic masculine physique rather than an alternative. Fossati states that 'CGI and digital special effects in particular have...simulated and improved already existing film techniques.'⁶⁰⁹ While this concept of improvement is more subjective than Fossati seems to suggest, it can be argued that, in parallel, *300* aims to simulate and improve upon the visible results of the training techniques used by the actors. Turner argues:

In the sheer effort invested both by the men themselves and the post-production team, *300*'s actors/Spartans elide the line between reality and artifice (and actor and character),

⁶⁰⁵ Sutton, 'The suppleness of everyday life': CGI, the Lumières, and Perception after Photography', *Multimedia Histories. From the Magic Lantern to the Internet*, eds James Lyons and John Plunkett (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007, pp.18-30) pp.20-21

⁶⁰⁶ Holly Willis, *New Digital Cinema. Reinventing the Moving Image* (London: Wallflower, 2005) pp.2, 11

⁶⁰⁷ Keane, 2007, p.60

⁶⁰⁸ Willis, 2005, p.3

⁶⁰⁹ Fossati, 2009, p.41

writing on the very surfaces of their bodies their own determination to mould, remodel and (re)create their corporeality.⁶¹⁰

The notion of reality and artifice blurred is problematic, given the clearly ‘digitised’ appearance of the actors and the reception of the film, discussed below. However, *300*’s Spartan masculinity is a combination of physical and digital endeavour that both evokes and extends concepts associated with the bodybuilding culture that informed the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery genres. Turner’s characterisation of the process in terms of determination, moulding and remodelling underlines the connection to physique culture and indeed could be lifted from 1950s bodybuilding literature.

Bent Fausing suggests an audience hesitation to accept CGI or CGI-enhanced images of the human figure: ‘Most people connect digital images with manipulation, and manipulation with bodies.’⁶¹¹ Relying only partially—or not at all—on a photographic referent, this ‘electronic montage’ can place real figures in fictional proximity or create digital portraits of non-existent people.⁶¹² These techniques have negative associations, in terms of artifice or outright deception, a questionable arranging and (ex)changing of bodies.⁶¹³ As Fausing concedes, however, digital manipulation can also be characterised as an extension of photographic retouching techniques that date back to the nineteenth century; from this perspective the new technology merely provides further ‘possibilities for continuous creation, flexibility, mobility and accentuation’.⁶¹⁴ The use of CGI in *300*, and particularly its application to the Spartan bodies, was discussed regularly, if not always accurately, in media coverage. Some of the press reviews debated this digital enhancement in implicitly negative terms, Roger Ebert stating: ‘Although real actors play the characters and their faces are convincing, I believe their bodies are almost entirely digital creations.’⁶¹⁵ Downplaying the actors’ physiques and associated training, Ebert suggests these digital bodies are not fully integrated into the overall film and are less convincing than and therefore detached from the actors’ faces, rupturing the image of the unified

⁶¹⁰ Turner, 2009, p.139

⁶¹¹ Fausing, ‘Sore Society: The Dissolution of the Image and the Assimilation of the Trauma’, *Moving Images: From Edison to the Webcam*, eds John Fullerton and Astrid Söderbergh Widding (Sydney: John Libbey, 2000, pp.69-82) p.69

⁶¹² Fausing, 2000, p.69

⁶¹³ Fausing, 2000, p.70

⁶¹⁴ Fausing, 2000, p.70

⁶¹⁵ Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times* December 9 2006 [<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>; accessed 16.07.2010]

Spartan body. Discussing Gerard Butler's performance as Leonidas, Peter Bradshaw noted '...those twin slabs of pecs and the kind of ripped abs that come from 1,000 crunches a day—or at any rate a fair bit of digital tweaking in post-production.'⁶¹⁶ Far from enhancing the actors' training, the digital treatment of their bodies undermined them as the 'genuine' article, as every aspect of these built physiques could be attributed to CGI remodeling. However, the film's commercial success in the domestic and foreign markets⁶¹⁷ suggests that, in terms of audience reception, the digitised Spartan body was not perceived as problematic to any significant degree. This could be attributed to *300*'s origins as a graphic novel, which features stylised, non-naturalistic renderings of the Spartan warriors, or simply a wide acceptance of CGI effects in mainstream narrative cinema. On this level, the Spartan body of *300* achieved a popular success comparable to that of Schwarzenegger's built physique in the Conan films and the *peplum* hero's body exemplified by Reeves' Hercules.

'This is Sparta!'

The plot of *300* can be summarised as follows: In 480BC, Spartan king Leonidas refuses to accept Persian dominion over his land and people. Realising armed confrontation is inevitable, Leonidas asks the Ephors, Sparta's ancient line of priests, to sanction open warfare against the vast Persian army. Unable to win their approval at a time of religious festivity Leonidas leads 300 of his best warriors to Thermopylae, the only pass through which Persian troops can cross into Sparta. Fighting off wave after wave of Persian attacks, Leonidas is betrayed by the outcast Ephialtes (Andrew Tiernan), who enables the Persians to surround the Spartan troops. Refusing to surrender, Leonidas and his men are massacred but their example inspires Sparta and all Greece to stand against Persia, ensuring final victory.

⁶¹⁶ Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, Friday 23 March 2007 [guardian.co.uk, accessed 16.07.2010]

⁶¹⁷ Budgeted at \$65 million, *300* grossed \$210 million in North America alone.

As with *Conan the Barbarian 300* chronicles the hard-won acquisition of an extraordinary masculinity which is repeatedly put to the test. The back-cover blurb of the graphic novel proclaims: ‘these warriors are more than men...they are SPARTANS’.⁶¹⁸ Tough, uncompromising Spartan masculinity is instilled from early childhood. When young Leonidas strokes a shining shield, his father strikes it, emphasising the object’s purpose in physical terms. Like Conan and the earlier *peplum* heroes, the Spartans are minimally dressed, in little more than leather posing briefs, complemented by their signature red cloaks. High-angle, often overhead, lighting highlights the muscular torsos of mature Spartan warriors, emphasised additionally through composition and framing. In one scene, the display of these physiques is enhanced further by the impact of rainwater, a device employed in the 1958 *Hercules*. Spartan masculinity is both contained in and expressed by the displayed male body and what it expresses most forcibly is fighting prowess.

Turner notes of *300*: ‘Its celebration of the bare flesh it puts on display encodes both empowered masculinity and eroticised spectacle in the bodies of the Spartans.’⁶¹⁹ As discussed in Chapters One and Two, appeals to classical tradition legitimised images of the unclothed male body that could otherwise be culturally problematic in terms of their perceived passivity and sensuality. Decades before *300*, the term ‘Spartan’ became associated with US bodybuilding culture and was adopted by a physique photography company based in Hollywood, California. An advertisement published in the April 1951 edition of *Your Physique* includes the following text: ‘SPARTAN Announces Series 10 - Our latest and best Series spotlighting 12 handsome athletes.’⁶²⁰ The combination of classicism and athleticism provided a culturally sanctioned context—however specious—for the circulation of these images. It is notable that the reception of *300* evoked directly bodybuilding culture, Ebert stating: ‘Every single male character has the muscles of a finalist for Mr. Universe.’⁶²¹ He is however generalising and exaggerating here, especially in the case of characters such as Spartan warrior Astinos (Tom Wisdom), who has a more slender, athletic physique. Ebert also cites the characters’ ‘Schwarzeneggerian biceps’,⁶²² a

⁶¹⁸ Frank Miller (story and art) and Lynn Varley (colours), *300* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse Books, 1999)

⁶¹⁹ Turner, 2009, p.131

⁶²⁰ Joseph E. Weider (ed.), *Your Physique*, Vol.15, No.1, April, 1951 (Montreal: “Your Physique” Publishing Co., 1951) p.49

⁶²¹ Ebert, 2006

⁶²² Ebert, 2006

reference to probably the best-known winner of the Mr. Universe title and Schwarzenegger's own career as an action film star, which began with *Conan the Barbarian*. Reviews also made reference, indirect and direct, to the earlier *peplum* cycle that informed and influenced the Conan films. Mick LaSalle suggested 'those sculpted bodies make this one of the great beefcake extravaganzas of 2007',⁶²³ invoking bodybuilding culture and the *peplum*. As with the reception for *Conan the Barbarian*, comparisons with the *peplum* were not always intended as complimentary, A.O. Scott noting: 'In time, "300" may find its cultural niche as an object of camp derision, like the sword-and-sandals epics of an earlier, pre-computer-generated-imagery age.'⁶²⁴

While the exposed Spartan bodies may be read as camp, their dominant position in the film's *mise-en-scène* is crucial to the representation of the heroic white male. Turner states that in *300*: 'The physical and military power of the protagonists is literally embodied in and communicated through their heavily muscled physiques.'⁶²⁵ This depiction of the Spartan warrior is not intended as historically accurate or realistic. As shown in *The 300 Spartans*, the warriors wore body armour that covered and protected their vulnerable torsos. Historian Ernle Bradford noted that 'the armour of the [Spartan] hoplite was extremely heavy; far more so than that of most of his later successors on the battlefields of the world'.⁶²⁶ Instead there is an appeal to artistic tradition, or traditions. Turner suggests that *300* plays on an ancient opposition of nude Greek and clothed barbarian Other 'to contrast its representation of the Spartans and the Persians.'⁶²⁷ Unlike the Spartans, the Persian troops always wear full body uniforms, often with heavy armour, their physiques marginalised and even irrelevant in the representation of their masculine potency. In his foreword to the book *300: The Art of the Film*, Victor Davis Hanson argues the Spartans are depicted in 'the "heroic nude" manner that ancient Greek vase-painters portrayed Greek hoplites', also found in the iconography of frieze sculpture and pottery, yet notes 'their muscles bulging as if they were contemporary comic-book action heroes.'⁶²⁸ This suggests their representation is being legitimised on several levels. While Turner also sees

⁶²³ LaSalle, *San Francisco Chronicle* March 9, 2007 [www.sfgate.com; accessed 16.07.2010]

⁶²⁴ Scott, *The New York Times*, March 9, 2007 [www.nytimes.com; accessed 17.07.2010]

⁶²⁵ Turner, 2009, p.132

⁶²⁶ Bradford, *The Year of Thermopylae* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980) p.69

⁶²⁷ Turner, 2009, p.133

⁶²⁸ Hanson, *300. The Art of the Film* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse, 2007) p.6. Miller's renditions of Spartan warriors in the graphic novel are by and large less muscle-bound than the archetypal comic book hero.

a comparison with classical images of unclothed manliness, she states ‘300’s muscled masculinity is shaped rather by the “six-pack” of contemporary gym aesthetics.’⁶²⁹ It seems that a fusion of ancient and modern, high and low culture forms 300’s Spartan body. The Greco-Roman artistic tradition is invoked and made more accessible by being overlaid with representations of hyper-masculinity familiar to twenty-first century audiences.

In 300, masculinity is expressed through battle but also self-sacrifice, represented as not just a possibility but also inevitable and even desirable. This sacrifice is encapsulated in the image of the crucified hero. Crucifixion—literal or figurative—is a recurrent feature of classical epics, *pepla* and sword-and-sorcery films, as seen in *Spartacus* (1960), *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961), *Conan the Barbarian* and *Gladiator*. Discussing *Spartacus* and *El Cid* (1961), Leon Hunt states: ‘the epic hero embraces crucifixion with some degree of acceptance/willingness; it is the moment where he demonstrates his control over his own body through his ability to give it up.’⁶³⁰ As noted in Chapter Five, *Spartacus* offers up his body in the name of a noble cause; ultimate mastery of the corporeal form is expressed in its voluntary surrender.

300 depicts the death of Leonidas as the climax to the battle at Thermopylae, the Spartan king hit by multiple arrows and dying with his arms outstretched (*fig.3*). According to historical record, Leonidas was killed midway through the battle, as depicted in *The 300 Spartans*. While the Spartans fought to claim his corpse, it was subsequently taken by the Persians and decapitated, the head placed on a stake planted at a roadside.⁶³¹ This is a striking image but lacks the desired connotations of noble sacrifice. In 300, as Turner notes: ‘Leonidas, the only man with his eyes open, lies centrally framed and spread-eagled in the shape of a cross: the recognisable, if somewhat clichéd, spectacle of crucified saviour.’⁶³² The Spartan king becomes the saviour of Sparta, Greece, and by implication the entire free world. The comparison between Leonidas and Christ is by no means new, dating back many centuries. Just as Hercules was reconfigured as a Christian symbol, as

⁶²⁹ Turner, 2009, p.138

⁶³⁰ Hunt, ‘What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic’, *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men* pp.65-83, p.73

⁶³¹ Bradford, 1980, pp.142,143; Holland, 2005, pp.294, 295

⁶³² Turner, 2009, p.141

discussed in Chapter Four, Cartledge notes how third century AD Christian writer Origen suggested ‘that the central Christian mystery of Christ’s passion and death might be suitably illuminated by a comparison with the self-chosen and avoidable death of Leonidas’.⁶³³ In *300*, Leonidas is offered several opportunities to recognise Persian dominion and save himself, his warriors and all Sparta. The stand at Thermopylae is depicted as a question of principle as much as survival. Though represented as a contented and devoted husband and father, Leonidas chooses self-sacrifice without hesitation, linked with the notion that a Spartan cannot achieve his full potential within the domestic sphere of the family unit. True glory is found only in sacrifice to Sparta, described by one character as ‘a beautiful death’. While this Spartan doctrine of service and sacrifice can be compared with Christianity, I argue it has more in common with tenets of fascism, with regard to both the structuring of Spartan society and its attitude to non-Spartans. While *300* skirts around the former, its representation of the latter is central to the film.



Fig.3 *300*

⁶³³ Cartledge, 2006, p.174

Sparta as fascist archetype

Writing in 2010, Sven Schmalfluss noted ‘a newfound fascination with ancient Sparta in contemporary popular culture’, citing Miller’s graphic novel, the Snyder film adaptation, and video games such as *Spartan* and *God of War*.⁶³⁴ This revival of Sparta as source material reflects a centuries-old interest in the Greek city state, not least because the story of the Spartans at Thermopylae occupies a pivotal place in western history and culture. Holland notes: ‘The story of the Persian Wars serves as the founding-myth of European civilisation; as the archetype of the triumph of freedom over slavery, and of rugged civic virtue over enervated despotism.’⁶³⁵ This may be a simplistic and partial interpretation of the historical events yet it has remained valuable currency from a western perspective. In this respect, the Battle of Thermopylae serves as a classic inspirational tale and film versions play on this. *The 300 Spartans* ends with a spoken coda: ‘It was a stirring example to free people throughout the world of what a few brave men can accomplish once they refuse to submit to tyranny.’ Given the era of the film’s release, this statement has clear and presumably intentional Cold War parallels. In a Hollywood production of the early 1960s, the theme of freedom and bravery confronting tyranny from the East would have resonance for audiences concerned with Soviet or Chinese aggression and expansionism. Cartledge argues *The 300 Spartans* was obviously intended as anti-communist propaganda, with its emphasis on the fight for liberty.⁶³⁶ The promotion for *300* evokes clearly the notion of a timeless struggle for freedom, Hanson stating: ‘In universal terms, a small, free people had willingly outfought huge numbers of imperial subjects who advanced under the lash.’⁶³⁷ Sparta, it seems, stands unconditionally for freedom, democracy, reason and justice.

⁶³⁴ Schmalfluss, ‘“Ghosts of Sparta”: Performing the God of War’s Virtual Masculinity’, *Performing Masculinity*, eds Rainer Emig and Antony Rowland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp210-233) p.211

⁶³⁵ Holland, 2005, p.xviii

⁶³⁶ Cartledge, *Thermopylae. The Battle That Changed the World* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Macmillan, 2006) p.196

⁶³⁷ Tara DiLullo (text), *300. The Art of the Film* (Milwaukie, Oregon: Dark Horse, 2007) p.6

As several scholars have commented, this depiction of Sparta is problematic. Holland states: ‘Any portrayal of the Spartans as defenders of liberty does not perhaps tell the whole story.’⁶³⁸ In terms of historical record, Schmalfluss notes:

Sparta was a totalitarian society ruled by a warrior caste, which had to focus all its powers on securing the state’s wellbeing. The lives of all members of the Spartan *polis* (even the slaves) were structured for the purpose of upholding the system and defending it against foreign influences of any sort.⁶³⁹

Often portrayed as the valiant underdog in the struggle against imperialist Persia, Sparta was a militaristic state based upon a rigid class system, with an equally inflexible xenophobic outlook. Any characterisation of Sparta as a society of free men thus requires extreme qualification. Cartledge concurs that Sparta was based on a systematic, institutionalised exploitation of a native Greek underclass, the Helots, that amounted to virtual slavery.⁶⁴⁰ Indeed, Cartledge suggests the Spartan state was only made possible by ‘the conquest and reduction to helot (or community-slave) status of the very large Greek populations of Laconia and Messenia’, which brought extensive territory as the basis for agricultural wealth and freed the Spartans from direct labour to focus on military training.⁶⁴¹ It should be noted that this view of Spartan society is not universally shared. Bradford characterised the Spartans as ‘those strange and remarkable people, whose virtues the West would do well to emulate in our time.’⁶⁴² Bradford was writing in the late 1970s, as the Conservative and Republican parties were poised to retake power in the UK and the US. In this context, his statement can be viewed as part of a wider reaction against the perceived weaknesses and excesses of a liberalism associated with the 1960s. The qualities embodied by Sparta, its ‘military outlook and stubborn courage’,⁶⁴³ were both relevant and desirable in a social and political climate blighted by self-indulgence, hedonism and the ongoing Soviet threat.

⁶³⁸ Holland, 2005, pp.xix-xx

⁶³⁹ Schmalfluss, 2010, p.211

⁶⁴⁰ Cartledge, 2006, p.12

⁶⁴¹ Cartledge (ed.), *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.82

⁶⁴² Bradford, 1980, p.14

⁶⁴³ Bradford, 1980, p.14

While Sparta's status as a totalitarian slave state may be disputed, its appeal to Nazi Germany is a matter of record. Discussing Sparta's capacity for mass murder on racial grounds, Ben Kiernan argues: 'Cults of antiquity have provided genocidists with political models that span millennia and link continents...Hitler considered classical Sparta a model racialist state.'⁶⁴⁴ Holland notes how the Nazis were interested in Sparta generally and Thermopylae in particular: 'The three hundred who defended the pass were regarded by Hitler as representatives of a true master-race, one bred and raised for war.'⁶⁴⁵ This could be characterised as a misappropriation of Spartan culture for political ends, Hitler citing Sparta as spurious legitimisation and justification for Nazi doctrine. Certain aspects of Spartan culture, especially relating to sexuality, were diametrically opposed to Nazi ideology. Holland, however, does not believe Sparta was either misunderstood or misrepresented by the Nazis, identifying a direct link between their respective ideologies: 'Sparta's greatness...rested upon the merciless exploitation of her neighbours, a demonstration of how to treat *Untermenschen* that the Nazis would brutally emulate in Poland and occupied Russia.'⁶⁴⁶ This equation of Sparta with Nazi Germany is contentious yet has some application to the representation of the Spartan warriors in *300*. As discussed in Chapter Five, the promotion and reception of *Conan the Barbarian* referenced Nietzschean ideas of the *Übermensch* and, in some instances, the imagery and ideology of Nazi Germany. The film itself, despite an opening quotation from Nietzsche, resists such a straightforward reading, especially in regard to its depiction of racial difference. *300*, on the other hand, invokes fascist or neo-fascist doctrine without apparent comment, let alone criticism. For example, Leonidas' wife, Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey), claims: 'Only Spartan women give birth to real men' and the film depicts unquestioningly a state policy of selective breeding and infanticide that chimes with theories of eugenics now associated largely with the Nazi regime. It is notable that the only implied criticism of Spartan society by a Spartan is voiced by the traitor Theron (Dominic West), thus colouring and invalidating his claim: 'All men are not created equal. That's the Spartan code.'

The link between *300*'s Sparta and Nazi Germany is reflected in the response to the film from both the popular press and scholars. Critic Jonathan Romney observed:

⁶⁴⁴ Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007) p.27

⁶⁴⁵ Holland, 2005, p.xix

⁶⁴⁶ Holland, 2005, p.xx

With what I only hope is glib cynicism, Snyder is recycling the Hitlerian iconography of warriorship and Fatherland. Probably the Nazi-est movie Hollywood has ever made, *300* is what Leni Riefenstahl might have come up with, given the CGI budget.⁶⁴⁷

Thus the film is not just fascist but explicitly and by implication unashamedly Hitlerian or Nazi, in the tradition of the filmmaker most associated with Nazi Germany. Scholar Martin M. Winkler, a specialist in cinematic representations of the classical world, also identifies a fascist aesthetic in *300*, influenced in part by Riefenstahl.⁶⁴⁸ Both Romney and Winkler establish this direct connection but do not develop the idea further. In the former case, there is a suggestion that the fascist undercurrents are present and objectionable in theory but not to be taken seriously. The phrase ‘glib cynicism’ connotes a provocative but empty pose, even in the ‘Nazi-est’ Hollywood film ever made. Slavoj Žižek makes the point that the Nazis were not the first political movement to draw inspiration from Sparta as it was perceived at a given historical moment.⁶⁴⁹ He cites figures associated with the fomentation and realisation of the French Revolution of 1789, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Jacobins, who ‘admired Sparta and imagined the republican France as a new Sparta’.⁶⁵⁰ Art historian Alex Potts also notes a ‘demand for political rebirth through a revival of the elevated public values of ancient Greece and Rome... as if a radical alternative to the worn-out and corrupt *ancien régime* were being glimpsed in the mythic unities of a rejuvenated classical ideal.’⁶⁵¹ Potts does not single out Sparta as a primary inspiration for this movement, though Leonidas and Thermopylae certainly figured in post-revolutionary French art.⁶⁵² However the ‘emancipatory core’ Žižek identifies in Spartan military discipline is neither clarified nor developed as a concept, especially in relation to revolutionary France, while the rigid Spartan class system and ruthless exploitation of the Helots are dismissed as ‘historical paraphernalia’.⁶⁵³

It is notable that contemporary parallels identified in *300* were also received as fundamentally frivolous and insubstantial. Critic Trevor Johnston posed the question:

⁶⁴⁷ Romney, *The Independent*, 25 March 2007 [www.independent.co.uk, accessed 16.07.2010]

⁶⁴⁸ Winkler, *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo's New Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.208

⁶⁴⁹ Žižek, ‘The True Hollywood Left’, 2007 [www.lacan.com/zizhollywood.htm; accessed 14.02.2011]

⁶⁵⁰ Žižek, 2007

⁶⁵¹ Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal. Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994) p.223

⁶⁵² Examples include Jacques Louis David's painting ‘Leonidas at the Pass of Thermopylae’ 1814 (Potts, 1994, p.231)

⁶⁵³ Žižek, 2007

Any ideological connotations to the fact we're supposed to be cheering on the white guys as they scythe their way through turban-wearing Persian hordes? Hard to credit the picture with that much relevance, though it'll doubtless be huge in US Army camps'⁶⁵⁴

Yet if the image of the great white warrior has such resonance for serving soldiers in the twenty-first century, surely it is relevant to some degree. Johnston's comment touches on the representation of national, racial and, above all, ethnic difference that is crucial to the film's construction of Spartan masculinity, and links with the debates on Nazi parallels. Cartledge suggests that events of 9/11 in New York City and 7/7 in London give any study of Thermopylae and the wider East-West context renewed urgency and importance.⁶⁵⁵ Holland concurs that the war in Iraq and rise in anti-Muslim feeling across Europe 'combined with the attacks of September 11th to foster an agonised consciousness of the fault-line that divides the Christian West from the Islamic East.'⁶⁵⁶ The medieval epic *Kingdom of Heaven* (Ridley Scott, 2005), which depicts Christian-held Jerusalem under siege by Muslims, makes its contemporary relevance explicit with a written epilogue: 'Nearly a thousand years later, peace in the Kingdom of Heaven remains elusive.' While *300* is not directly concerned with Christian-Muslim antagonism, its depiction of Caucasian Spartans versus non-Caucasian Persians can be readily interpreted as reflecting the American-led military operations in the Middle East. Winkler regards *300* as a film of its moment, not least in the way the associated patriotism and sacrifice for the state 'have been routinely and sometimes sincerely invoked on all sides of the political spectrum.'⁶⁵⁷ In this respect, the Sparta of *300* can be read as a role model or propaganda tool, whatever the intentions of the film's producers.

Zizek presents a counter-argument where the 'small and poor country' of Greece is invaded by the vast Persian empire, which boasts 'much more developed military technology—are the Persian elephants, giants and large fire arrows not the ancient version of high-tech arms?'⁶⁵⁸ From this perspective, Greece can be equated with Iraq or Afghanistan, while imperialist Persia invites clear comparisons with the United States. The Spartans with their 'discipline and spirit of sacrifice' bear more resemblance to the Taliban

⁶⁵⁴ Johnston, *Time Out* London Issue 1909, March 21-27 2007 [timeout.com, accessed 16.07.2010]

⁶⁵⁵ Cartledge, 2006, p.xv

⁶⁵⁶ Holland, 2005, p.xiv

⁶⁵⁷ Winkler, 2009, p.208

⁶⁵⁸ Zizek, 2007

rulers of Afghanistan than the US (and allied) invasion force.⁶⁵⁹ Žizek also draws a broader historical parallel, linking the Persian invaders of *300* with the foreign policy of earlier US Republican administrations, such as Reagan's intervention in Nicaragua during the 1980s to undermine an elected leftwing government.⁶⁶⁰ This argument lacks both factual and intellectual precision. At the time of Thermopylae, Greece consisted of several independent states, Sparta included, and was not recognised as a unified country as such. US foreign policy during the Reagan era rarely involved the deployment of American troops, even on a modest scale, relying in Nicaragua and other countries on locally recruited militia with US backing. The cited elephants and giants, not to mention a barrage of explosive weapons, are shown to be ineffective against Spartan courage, discipline and ingenuity, though this response is recounted by propagandist Dilios (David Wenham), a figure I discuss later on. The climactic slaughter of the Spartans at Thermopylae in a hail of arrows is likened to being 'bombed to death by techno-soldiers operating sophisticated weapons from a safe distance',⁶⁶¹ yet the film has the Spartan warriors dismiss arrows as a coward's weapon, rejecting them out of choice. Furthermore, *300* ends with the Spartan-led charge at Platea, which will see the Persian invaders, 'techno-soldiers' or otherwise, defeated and driven from Greece.

'Souls as black as hell'

I argue an insistence on historical or contemporary parallels in *300* carries some weight, given the extreme contrast between Spartan and non-Spartan. Turner notes how 'the Persian enemy is burlesqued and "orc-ified", characterised not only as barbarian "Other" but as physically grotesque and subhuman.'⁶⁶² 'Orc-ification' refers to the vicious yet cowardly troll-like creatures in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954, 1954, 1955), who serve the forces of darkness. More specifically, Turner is invoking Peter Jackson's film adaptations (2001, 2002, 2003), which render the Orcs' appearance with

⁶⁵⁹ Žizek, 2007

⁶⁶⁰ Žizek, 2007

⁶⁶¹ Žizek, 2007

⁶⁶² Turner, 2009, p.129

prosthetic make-ups. This comparison is also employed in press reviews, not just to the Persians but to all who are non-Spartans and betray Sparta's cause. Critic Andrew Osmond states: 'Sparta's own priests are... presented as leprous, slobbering Gollums',⁶⁶³ referring to another character from *The Lord of the Rings*. As with the fascist overtones, the significance of this representation is played down, reflected in Romney's review: 'But substitute the word "Orc" for "Persian", and you can see that *300* never remotely makes any serious claim to depict the real Xerxes.'⁶⁶⁴ Constructing the enemies of Sparta in forms intended to be read as fantastic and non-historical, *300* disengages itself from and thereby disavows any contentious ideologies associated with physical and/or racial superiority.

This reading of *300* can be criticised as naïve. Celebrating the Spartan physique, the film highlights also a corresponding horror and loathing for the supposedly 'imperfect' body. The opening images include a valley filled with the bones of Spartan infants discarded at birth for being too small, puny, sickly or misshapen. Physical deformity is linked consistently with moral and spiritual corruption. Persian characters in *300* include such blatantly monstrous figures as an obese blade-handed executioner, not featured in the graphic novel, and Xerxes' elite guards, the Immortals, who wear sinister war masks to conceal their hideous faces. This contrasts with enlightened Christian ruler Baldwin IV (Edward Norton), the 'leper king', in *Kingdom of Heaven*, who wears a mask to cover his corrupted, decaying flesh yet displays an indomitable strength of mind and spirit in his determination to maintain the peace between Christian and Muslim. Bradshaw notes of *300*: 'I have never seen a film go in quite so enthusiastically for the ugly-equals-wicked equation.'⁶⁶⁵ A significant character from this perspective is the traitor Ephialtes, rendered here as a grotesque hunchback, though there is no historical account or evidence that the real Ephialtes was in any way deformed. In *The 300 Spartans*, he is depicted as a disgruntled shepherd, played by conventionally handsome actor Kieron Moore.

In *300*, Ephialtes is a figure comparable with Gollum (Andy Serkis) in the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, pitiful yet also malevolent and ultimately treacherous. In the first scene

⁶⁶³ Osmond, 'Southern Death Cult' *Sight and Sound* May 2007[www.bfi.org.uk; accessed 16.07.10]

⁶⁶⁴ Romney, 2007

⁶⁶⁵ Bradshaw, 2007

between Leonidas and Ephialtes, the latter emerges from the shadows, a creature of darkness. There is a contrast of their bodies, the perfection of Leonidas, upright and erect, opposed to the deformity of Ephialtes, crouched and marked by self-loathing. Leonidas treats Ephialtes with respect and compassion, calling him by name and explaining patiently why a man unable to raise his shield cannot be part of a Spartan military force. Ephialtes' body cannot join with the larger Spartan warrior body, as his twisted form would be a fatal weak link in the phalanx formation crucial to their strategy. Leonidas, king of Sparta, apologises to Ephialtes, an outcast who should not have lived under Spartan law, calls him friend, and claps him on the shoulder, linking briefly their perfect and imperfect forms.

In *Beowulf* (Robert Zemeckis, 2007), Grendel (Crispin Glover) is a grotesque, murderous giant yet also wretched and deserving of sympathy. As the half-human son of King Hrothgar (Anthony Hopkins), he suggests the difference between man and monster, or normal and abnormal, is not so clear cut. In *Beowulf and Grendel* (Sturla Gunnarsson, 2005), the latter is a large humanoid, described as a troll, motivated by vengeance for the killing of his father. Despite such 'monstrous' actions as playing skittles with human skulls, Grendel inspires respect, empathy and sympathy from his slayer, Beowulf (Gerard Butler). The ambiguity constructed in these films is refuted by *300*, despite Ephialtes' Spartan parentage. Frustrated and enraged by Leonidas' 'rejection', he discards his father's Spartan shield and the scene ends with a medium close-up of Ephialtes' already deformed features twisted further by blind anger. It is notable the Spartan uniform he wears that belonged to his disgraced father does not fit him. The cloak cannot conceal his massive deformed back and the helmet will not sit on his misshapen head. The uniform does not fit Ephialtes and Ephialtes is unfit to be a Spartan. It is arguable the Spartans have created a 'monster' who is forced to turn against them yet there is little or no suggestion that Ephialtes possesses an intrinsically benevolent nature, corrupted by prejudice, abuse and mistreatment. As Sean Cubitt states: 'In the visual language of the film, all villains are grotesque in some form or other, and one feels that he has merely revealed his true nature rather than changed.'⁶⁶⁶ Ephialtes' subsequent actions serve only to validate and justify the Spartan policy of eugenics, discarding infants unfit to join their society.

⁶⁶⁶ Cubitt, 'The Supernatural in Neo-Baroque Hollywood', *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (New York and London: Routledge, 2009, pp.47-65) p.48

Alongside the demonising of deformity *300* pits a Caucasian Greece epitomised by Sparta against a non-Caucasian Persia, highlighting ethnic difference. Maggie Günsberg's distinction between superior white masculinity and inferior non-white masculinity,⁶⁶⁷ while contentious if applied to the *peplum* or *Conan the Barbarian*, is not so problematic in the case of *300*. The film also appears to endorse Richard Dyer's observation that qualities praiseworthy in a white body—energy, power, attractiveness—become negative attributes in a black body; the latter is linked consistently and insistently with lust, appetite, brutality, animal instinct and destruction.⁶⁶⁸ The first Persian to appear in *300* is an emissary to Sparta (*fig.4*). Seated on horseback, framed from a low angle, his imposing form suggests both power and aggression. Though dressed in fine robes, connoting civilisation, his snarling features evoke a primitive, animalistic quality. This is underlined and arguably confirmed by the collection of human skulls—heads of vanquished kings—he holds in his right hand. The sky behind him reinforces a sense of turbulence and threat. The emissary serves as a manifestation and forewarning of the Persian beast to come. The sequence with the deformed, subhuman priests concludes with them taking Xerxes' gold from a gloating Persian officer, whose dark face, framed in close up, turns pitch black as the scene ends. Deformity and non-whiteness are inextricably linked and depicted as malevolent forces, underlined by the negative connotations of blackness.

⁶⁶⁷ Günsberg, *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.118

⁶⁶⁸ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1986) p.139



Fig.4 300

300 is at odds with depictions of racial difference in other recent classical epics. In *Gladiator*, Maximus (Russell Crowe) becomes best friends with the African Juba (Djimon Hounsou), who is treated as an equal and often dressed in the same costume, the blue tunic of the gladiator. Like Maximus, he is a husband and father whose greatest wish is to see his family once more. This is tokenistic, perhaps, but at least a more positive stereotype—the loyal sidekick—marked by courage and honour. In *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004), while Aristotle (Christopher Plummer) describes the Persians as ‘an inferior race’, which could be construed as Greek snobbery and propaganda, they are not dehumanised or demonised and retain their dignity. *Kingdom of Heaven* depicts the Muslims on equal terms to the Christian heroes, being intelligent, articulate and courageous. A sense of mutual respect between enemies entirely absent from *300* enables compromise and an honourable surrender for the Christians defending the besieged Jerusalem. Prior to the raising of the crescent, a symbol of Islam, Muslim leader Saladin (Ghassan Massoud) places a fallen crucifix back on a church altar.

In *300*, King Xerxes is depicted as a black giant, played by Brazilian actor Rodrigo Santoro (*fig.5*), his height increased, skin darkened and voice deepened in post-production.⁶⁶⁹ The CGI technology that enhanced the Spartan bodies is here employed to different and more extreme ends, creating an implausibly large—or larger than life—human figure. This underlines Xerxes' claim of divinity,⁶⁷⁰ the overwhelming odds faced by the Spartans and, above all, the concept of blackness as threat. His first encounter with Leonidas constructs a series of clear contrasts. Leonidas walks to the meeting unaccompanied and unarmed, while Xerxes is carried on a vast gold throne by hundreds of slaves, his troops poised with bows drawn. Leonidas has a full head of hair and a beard, denoting mature masculinity; Xerxes is shaven and smooth-skinned, a male who plays down his manliness. Leonidas would willingly die for his men; Xerxes will sacrifice countless thousands for his personal glory. On a more general level, Spartans are warriors by breeding, training and conviction, while Persian forces are slaves who fight under the whip.



Fig.5 *300*

⁶⁶⁹ In *The 300 Spartans*, Xerxes is played by English actor David Farrar. This reflects a common casting strategy in Hollywood epics of this era, where cultured and cruel villains were often played by actors who were British or could sound British, such as Laurence Olivier in *Spartacus*, the Irish Stephen Boyd in *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959) and the Australian Frank Thring in *The Vikings* (Richard Fleischer, 1958).

⁶⁷⁰ Xerxes was also enlarged in ancient representations, reflecting his 'divinity' and status.

If Leonidas epitomises the Spartan virtues, Xerxes is associated with indulgence and appetite. Turner notes: ‘By contrast with the moral and physical austerity of the Spartans, Xerxes’ body signifies luxury, corruption and effeminacy.’⁶⁷¹ Favouring jewellery over armour, Xerxes is a mirror opposite to Leonidas: brown-skinned, hairless, passive and androgynous, his features enhanced with make-up. This representation reflects, to a point, attitudes found in the historical Persia of Xerxes’ time. Holland stresses how ‘Xerxes, tall and handsome, *looked* a king. This was a crucial consideration: the Persians were a people so obsessed by physical appearance that every nobleman kept a make-up artist in his train.’⁶⁷² Yet the bejewelled, painted Xerxes of *300* does not necessarily equate with the historical figure, nor was the latter defined solely by his appearance. Discussing the real Xerxes, Holland argues the Persian ruler had proven himself as a soldier, leader and king: ‘In the hunt and on campaign, leading from the front, he would have given ample evidence of his personal bravery.’⁶⁷³ In *300*, Xerxes is a notable non-combatant, contrasting with the Spartans who can only realise and express their full masculine potency through battle and sacrifice. Measured against the Spartan body, Xerxes is both super-human and less than a man. His multiple gold body piercings can be read as a misuse or abuse of his physical form at odds with the Spartan reverence for the perfected yet unadorned physique. Leonidas’ last spear throw marks a different piercing of Xerxes’ flesh, one that destroys the Persian king’s public image as a gilded living god.⁶⁷⁴ While Xerxes is not killed or vanquished, in slicing open his face Leonidas exposes the frail and inferior mortal behind the facade, anticipating ultimate Spartan victory.

⁶⁷¹ Turner, 2009, pp.133-134

⁶⁷² Holland, 2005, p.206

⁶⁷³ Holland, 2005, p.206

⁶⁷⁴ Reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling’s Afghanistan-set story *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888), and the 1975 film directed by John Huston, where soldier turned monarch Daniel Dravot’s claim to divinity is exposed as a sham when his reluctant bride bites his face, drawing mortal blood.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the representation of Spartan masculinity in *300*, focused on the exposed muscular male physique in scenarios of heroic action. The latter invokes bodybuilding culture, the *peplum* and the sword-and-sorcery genre yet *300*'s Spartan body is invested with specific and significant connotations that appear openly and unashamedly fascistic. This links to the totalitarian, xenophobic ideology attributed to historical Sparta, reflected in its cooption by Nazi Germany and the reception of *300*. Unlike the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery genres, which subject their heroes to extreme punishment but emphasise survival and reprisal, *300* highlights the death of its Spartan warriors in battle. Far from negating their bodies as sites of heroic masculinity, this underlines their noble sacrifice as an inspirational example to fellow Spartans, whose ultimate triumph over the Persian hordes is so certain and unquestionable it need not be represented on screen, occurring outside the film's diegesis. Individual Spartan bodies may fall, epitomised by the crucifixion of Leonidas, yet the qualities of one Spartan warrior are the qualities of all. The notion of willing sacrifice for state or country can be related to the contemporary West-Middle East antagonism and conflict, which may also be characterised as a Christian-Muslim, or, as expressed in *300*, white and non-white schism. Compared to the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery genres, there is no discernible ambiguity or complexity in the representation of the non-Spartan. Where *Conan the Barbarian* depicts white and black bodies in an uneasy, unresolved relationship marked by mutual dependence, *300* places the idealised, heroised white male body in direct opposition to the alien, antagonistic non-white body.

There is a case for arguing that *300*'s representation of white masculinity is not intended to be read as an endorsement of racist or fascist ideology and should therefore not be taken seriously. As noted, most critical responses to the issues discussed do not treat them as matters of great consequence. In the film itself, sporadic narration by Spartan warrior Dilios provides a subjective framing device. This enables the story to be seen as Spartan propaganda post-Thermopylae, intended to inspire the senate and the Spartan-led Greek army gathered for the decisive battle at Platea, with inevitable elaboration, exaggeration, fabrication and demonising of the enemy. Yet *300* offers no critical distance or even

commentary on this perspective or, by extension, its attendant subtexts. The heroic masculinity and willing sacrifice of the Spartans evoke images and ideas of white male supremacy—especially in combative terms—associated with fascist ideology, legitimised and validated by the film’s representation. Contentious aspects of Spartan society, for example, eugenics, are depicted without question. Their physically imperfect and/or non-Caucasian opponents are linked with physical and mental inferiority, decadence and corruption, darkness and grotesquerie. *300* appears to subscribe unconditionally to reactionary and fascist depictions of white masculine potency and authority. This is not to suggest its makers—or original author Frank Miller—were working to a calculated fascist or racist agenda. Rather, in drawing uncritically on reactionary concepts of white superiority, non-white degeneracy and physical appearance as moral measure, the film perpetuates these discredited stereotypes as acceptable if presented in the form of ‘mere’ entertainment.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the development of the *peplum* and subsequent *peplum*-influenced films in terms of the representation of heroic masculinity. Beginning with the ‘ground rules’ established by *Hercules* (Francisci, 1958), identified as the first of the *peplum* cycle, I progressed through the counter representations of *Duel of the Titans* (Corbucci, 1961), *Jason and the Argonauts* (Chaffey, 1963) and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (Cottafavi, 1961), to later reconfigurations of the *peplum* hero in *Conan the Barbarian* (Milius, 1982) and *300* (Snyder, 2007). I have argued that the depiction of heroic masculinity in these films is often problematic and contradictory. While the *peplum* has been noted for an apparent endorsement of a reactionary, patriarchal status quo this aspect of the genre is often subverted on multiple levels, intentionally or otherwise. Examining the various contexts in which these films were produced and released, I discussed their relationship to wider debates on masculinity prevalent at the time. In all instances I feel this has both broadened and deepened my analysis of the selected cinematic texts, their reflection of contemporary issues and concerns—national and international—also underlining their worth as objects of study rather than peripheral and largely disregarded examples of popular mainstream entertainment that do not merit serious consideration. I suggested further that the films under analysis constitute an ongoing debate on how the *peplum* hero’s status as marginalised ‘other’ can be reconciled with the cultural, social, hierarchical and gender orthodoxies constructed by the narratives. Discussing the various representations of Hercules over the centuries, Alastair Blanshard argues: ‘Heroes always stand on the outside. Their passions make them unsuitable members of a community. They cannot be assimilated, only propitiated.’⁶⁷⁵ As *Hercules* demonstrates, a hero may restore a rightful and righteous king to his throne yet has no place in the new order he helps to create. While I have identified and discussed exceptions to the rule, notably *Duel of the Titans* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, this tension is reflected in both the variation and continuation in evidence from Steve Reeves’ Hercules to Gerard Butler’s Leonidas in *300*. The latter may be a king himself yet the ultimate demonstration of his heroic masculinity is

⁶⁷⁵ Blanshard, *Hercules. A Heroic Life* (London: Granta Books, 2005) p.30

manifested far from his kingdom which is given up willingly in the name of a greater cause.

In this section of my thesis I will recapitulate and expand on the debates explored in my case study chapters. As noted in the introduction, no selection of film titles can be regarded as definitive or unbiased and I shall again address this potentially problematic aspect of textual analysis-based research. To take one example, at the beginning of this thesis I cited the commercial success of *Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959), reportedly the biggest box-office hit in the UK in 1960. While this reference could suggest the film would occupy a central place in my discussion, I referred to it subsequently only in passing, in relation to *Hercules*, *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. There is an argument for regarding *Hercules Unchained* as a key *peplum* title and in terms of its international success, which in turn helped establish the *peplum* as a popular genre worldwide, this is undoubtedly the case. From the perspective of my research interests, however, the film marked little advancement on the debates raised by *Hercules* and I believe the more interesting departures from its predecessor were developed more fully and significantly in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. Nevertheless, I recognise that for some *peplum* scholars *Hercules Unchained* has a multifaceted significance for studies of the genre that is not reflected in this thesis.

In Chapter Two, I explored the construction of heroic masculinity in *Hercules* and *Duel of the Titans* and argued that, in the case of the former, this representation is inherently problematic and prone to rupture. Outlining the contexts in which *Hercules* was made and the forms of masculinity available at the time, I suggested that its part-origins in 1950s debates on masculinity, including the body culture that supplied the film's star, contributed to this instability. *Hercules* was produced during an era of political tensions, largely in relation to the Cold War, and social and economic transformation and upheaval, both within Italy and elsewhere. While I do not believe Steve Reeves' Hercules can be labelled straightforwardly as a Cold Warrior or embodiment of traditional/reactionary values, the film offered a reassuring and, in the form of its star, Americanised image of masculine authority and potency, evoking also a pre-industrialised, pre-technologised and pre-historic world where male physical strength held an extraordinary value that could not be

questioned, diminished, marginalised, or vanquished. Clearly, this depiction of the heroic male body held wide appeal, reflected in the film's worldwide success. Furthermore, the film's construction of Herculean masculinity provided a genre template employed with minimal variation by many subsequent *pepla*.

In cinematic terms, whether cultural, industrial or economic, *Hercules* can be linked with the giant-sized action heroes of Italian silent cinema, notably Maciste, the Tarzan films, the big-budget Hollywood biblical and classical epics of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the Italian-produced historical-mythical adventure films of the 1950s, not least *Ulysses* (Camerini, 1954). These factors all contributed to a context that made its production viable yet arguably the iconography and ideology of bodybuilding culture, which itself drew on classical images of masculinity in general and Hercules in particular, served as a more immediate and significant influence on the construction of the hero which consequently also embodied the attendant tensions and contradictions. Highlighting the exposed male body, *Hercules* is unable to repress, displace or legitimise the eroticism associated with this display; all that is done by the body and to the body serves ultimately to foreground the body itself as the dominant site of spectacle, passive or active. The construction of femininity, far from endorsing a conservative representation of masculinity, contributes further to the latter's disintegration. The supposedly domestic, passive and vulnerable female is disengaged from the hero, a schism their tokenistic reunion is unable to resolve. The self-sufficient, matriarchal Amazons cannot defeat the patriarchal order led by Hercules yet nor are they defeated by it, their society left unchallenged and unchanged. In short, *Hercules* presents the classical hero as a figurehead for male physical strength and, by extension, a reactionary patriarchal status quo, yet the means by which it achieves this representation render it unsustainable.

As a counter-discourse to *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* offers a potential resolution of debates raised in the earlier film, constructing in the form of Romulus a viable, evolving masculinity that engages positively with a nurturing, mutually beneficial femininity. Where Hercules remains Other to his companions in adventure, his perfection perceived as a threat as much as a blessing, the climactic founding of Rome places Romulus at the head of a new, benevolent patriarchy, his male potency incorporated into and contained by a

stable social structure. This ‘Romulan’ masculinity is also marked by qualification and restriction. Romulus may be unusually strong and skilled in combat but when outnumbered by armed men he is captured, imprisoned and tortured, saved from instant death only through the intervention of the Sabine princess Julia. This emphasis on male vulnerability and dependence is unusual in the *peplum*, suggesting a more complex construction of heroic masculinity which does not equate with unquestioned dominance and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, it could not be easily reconciled with the dominant narrative, thematic and ideological requirements of the wider genre, not least because the more contentious and problematic aspects of the *peplum* hero are displaced onto Romulus’ twin brother, Remus, who is subsequently marginalised and eliminated. It is notable that while *Duel of the Titans* proved a commercial success it had little obvious influence on later *pepla*, which adhered largely to the *Hercules* formula that—on the surface—valorised masculine potency, perfection and independence.

Chapter Three explored the representation of Herculean masculinity in *Jason and the Argonauts*, in terms of emulation, differentiation and inversion. Filmed mainly in Italy, at the height of the *peplum* cycle, this US-financed film can be characterised as a *peplum*, imitation *peplum* or pseudo-*peplum* and the narrative references the same Greco-Roman myth as the second half of *Hercules*. I debated and disputed *Jason and the Argonauts*’ status as a *peplum* film in line with my definition of the term and focused instead on its position as a conscious, strategic and acknowledged reaction to *Hercules* and the Steve Reeves incarnation of the title character. Though employing Italian locations and facilities and a predominantly British cast and crew, *Jason and the Argonauts* relates to 1960s debates on a new or renewed American masculinity as embodied by President John F. Kennedy that promoted youth, intelligence, initiative and toughness in both the domestic and international spheres. K.A. Cuordileone states the Kennedy presidency offered, ‘a reconciliation of intellect...with masculine virility’⁶⁷⁶ and the representation of Jason, played by the American Todd Armstrong,⁶⁷⁷ rather than Hercules, played by the South African-British Nigel Green, shares or at least evokes these characteristics. While linkage of this kind should be treated as tentative and speculative, the US promotion for *Jason and*

⁶⁷⁶ Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005) pp.169-170

⁶⁷⁷ While Armstrong’s dialogue was dubbed by British actor Tim Turner, the character retains a distinct if unobtrusive American accent.

the Argonauts emphasised the central quest's contemporary relevance in terms of Cold War parallels. As leader of the Argonauts, Jason takes his crew through perilous foreign lands in search of a prize that confers great power, overcoming hostile opposition through a combination of mental and physical strength. I argued *Jason and the Argonauts* belongs to a group of early 1960s US films that reflected the Kennedy-centred debates on new forms of masculinity, leadership and associated challenges, such as the Frank Sinatra/Rat Pack vehicles *Ocean's Eleven* (Milestone, 1960) and *Sergeants 3* (Sturges, 1962). While the Sinatra films promoted ideas and ideals of masculinity in forms that proved popular with contemporary US audiences, *Jason and the Argonauts* seemed unable to escape an association with the *peplum* genre, despite the intentions and best efforts of its makers, and consequently suffered in commercial terms from the *peplum*'s declining appeal.

In contrast to Jason, the representation of Hercules and his associated heroic masculinity subverts and erases his familiar attributes to reduce the super-man to a man. *Jason and the Argonauts* invites the spectator—intra- and extra-diegetic—to recognise and acknowledge Hercules and his pre-established heroic status, yet dismantles this status over his remaining scenes. Hercules is markedly older than the Reeves version, his physical presence less spectacular and the Herculean feats of strength few and modest compared with the standard *peplum* representation. Hercules can be compared with the protagonists of epics such as *The Alamo* (Wayne, 1960) and *El Cid* (Mann, 1961) which counter the Kennedy-esque film representations of heroic masculinity with more conservative forms that emphasise a wise, middle-aged patriarchal leader, contrasted with a younger generation at best rash and inexperienced, at worst selfish and corrupt. Lacking the maturity and judgement of Davy Crockett and Rodrigo de Bivar, Hercules is invested instead with negative qualities that *The Alamo* and *El Cid* associate with reckless youth: arrogant, boastful, impulsive, self-centred. Furthermore, he is denied the self-sacrifice of Crockett and de Bivar, who willingly give up their lives in the furtherance of a noble cause that will end in ultimate victory. Having roused the metal giant Talos through an act of petty theft, Hercules flees from his enemy, fails to challenge him in combat and stands by as an impotent witness while Jason engages with and vanquishes their pursuer. In short, *Jason and the Argonauts* systematically devalues Herculean masculinity as an ineffectual, outdated and unstable construction that can neither lead nor serve an evolving patriarchy.

In Chapter Four I discussed *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, arguably the *peplum* film which attracted the most critical and scholarly debate around the time of its original release. While this response was spearheaded by the French journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the film was also discussed extensively and generally favourably by Italian and British commentators. It is notable that, so far as research indicates, there was little or no corresponding response in the United States, where the film was belatedly released in 1963 in a cut-down, rescored form as *Hercules and the Captive Women*. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offers an interesting reflection both of *peplum* conventions, appearing to subvert or even parody the Reeves incarnation of Hercules, and the debates and concerns of the film's era. The latter include a new willingness within Italy to discuss openly the country's recent fascist past, linked here with the Cold War anxieties of the early 1960s and fears of an aggressive, predatory femininity that evokes and exaggerates the 'wicked woman' stereotype familiar to the *peplum* but also has parallels in the 'vamp' persona of the early twentieth century and 1950s concepts of the 'new', economically empowered woman.

Hercules Conquers Atlantis is one of the few *peplum* films to address on any terms the fascist element often linked to the genre. I suggested however that the 'Nazi' identification of the villains by Italian scholars could be read as a sidestepping or indeed evasion of Italy's own experience of fascist government. Furthermore, this suggests a denial of any responsibility or culpability for the Fascist regime that controlled Italy for nearly two decades. Yet set against the context of Italian society and culture in the early 1960s, a mainstream film invoking fascism made in a country recently under fascist rule is significant in and of itself, whatever the constraints of this invocation. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* may be compromised as an anti-fascist allegory, focusing too narrowly on Nazi Germany in its imagery and ideas, or perhaps it is more the Italian interpretation of the text rather than the text itself that is problematic here. Whatever the case, the film is at least a provocative exploration of totalitarianism, racial purity and eugenics in a *peplum* context, which in invoking Nazism also references Italian Fascism, if only by association. As noted, critics and scholars outside Italy have discussed the film's fascist allegory without making a distinction between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. This could be attributed to an assumption that their respective ideologies were more or less interchangeable, which is not

the case. It also suggests, however, that the film's approach to the issue is not necessarily compromised by local historical revisionism.

The early scenes of *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* associate the title figure repeatedly with passivity, appetite and leisure, characteristics notably at odds with the standard *peplum* representation of Hercules. I argued that, once the entire film is taken into account, Reg Park's Hercules can be read as a more positive and sustainable construction of masculinity than his predecessor Steve Reeves' more commercially successful and widely circulated version. Reeves' Hercules is portrayed as a virtuous super-man, even his renunciation of immortality in *Hercules* and extended liaison with Queen Omphale in *Hercules Unchained* making negligible difference to his overall depiction or ability to perform the decisive actions that resolve the films' narratives. At the same time, he exists outside all social and domestic structures and restrictions, his extra-ordinary masculine potency represented as a potential threat that cannot be contained. The Park Hercules retains the imposing physique and extraordinary strength associated with the demigod, underlined by the casting of a champion bodybuilder who competed against Reeves and subsequently took the Mr. Universe title, and such super-human feats as pulling a ship by its anchor chain. Yet this Hercules is also linked firmly with society, domesticity and family, attributes denied the Reeves incarnation despite his relationship with Iole, itself a site of tension and separation.

In *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, the hero's main opponent, Queen Antinea, represents a comprehensive rejection of the domestic sphere, embodied by her daughter Ismene, first seen as a sacrificial victim and at perpetual risk of elimination until the matriarchy ruled by Antinea and the Queen herself are eradicated through Hercules' actions. I argued further that Antinea embodies in allegorical form a conglomeration of social and historical anxieties. Her 'unnatural' femininity is cold, calculating and cruel—underlined in standard fashion through her black costumes and hair—and linked with fascism and the nuclear threat. This extreme manifestation of a *peplum* stereotype—the sexually aggressive, castrating matriarch—could be read as a reactionary response to the perceived threat of the economically and socially independent woman at the time of the film's production and release. The film counters, or at least qualifies, this interpretation of Antinea through the figure of Deianeira, wife to Hercules. On one level, Deianeira could be taken to represent a

domesticated, marginalised femininity and as such is merely another *peplum* stereotype, emphasised by her limited screen-time. She is, however, neither passive nor subservient to the masculine authority of Hercules, the latter entrusting his body to her ministrations and heeding her request that he forswear homosocial adventures in favour of their mature heterosexual union, as evidenced by their adult son Hylus. As with Julia and Romulus in *Duel of the Titans*, Deianeira is represented in terms of equality in her relationship with Hercules.

I also compared the representation of masculinity in *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* with those found in *La dolce vita* (Fellini, 1960) and *Accattone* (Pasolini, 1961), which locate their debates on male potency in a contemporary and ostensibly realistic version of Rome. Hercules represents an uninhibited and unashamed enjoyment of *la dolce vita*, or the good life, secure in his domestic environment and associated commitment and responsibility. This stability and integration is notably lacking in Fellini and Pasolini's protagonists. *La dolce vita* and *Accattone* offer critiques, explicit or implied, of modern Italy as embodied by Rome, while *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* reflects the positive aspects, facilitated perhaps by its spatial-temporal distance from contemporary Italy and ostensibly fantastical or mythological setting. This could suggest that the 'new' Italy of the early 1960s, which emphasised stability, prosperity and leisure, is itself a fantasy on a par with the most outlandish *pepla* when contrasted with the reality as represented in the Fellini and Pasolini films. Yet *La dolce vita* and *Accattone* emphasise repeatedly and at length the personal failings of their male protagonists, which suggests that the major obstacles to their participation in a good or better life are within themselves rather than the societies and cultures with which they are plainly at odds. Hercules' external struggles are seen to be resolved through a combination of intelligence and action, unlike the internal conflicts of journalist Marcello Rubini in *La dolce vita*. The masculinity represented by Rubini is compromised and ineffectual on multiple levels, while the destitute pimp Accattone is a mere façade of masculinity with no intrinsic strength.

As a powerful, socially integrated male, Hercules marks a decisive break from the recent as opposed to mythological past and any fascist associations, represented unambiguously in the form of the film's villains. He also serves as an emblem for the present, as represented

by the affluence and leisure of the new Italy. On an international level, Hercules represents confidence and reassurance for the future, countering the disturbances caused by political, social and economic upheaval. From this perspective Hercules, remodelled over the ages according to the requirements of a given society or culture, now represents the ideal Italian male and perhaps the ideal Italy in allegorical form. The fact that he is played by a British actor does not necessarily compromise or invalidate this parallel. As Reeves' success as Hercules demonstrates, the mythical hero could be embodied by a non-Italian performer linked to the American-based bodybuilding culture so long as he conformed to local audience expectations. Above all, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* offered a form of Herculean masculinity appreciated and acclaimed by critics of the time for being both at variance with the Reeves incarnation and relevant to wider contemporary concerns, domestic and international, qualities I believe to be lacking in later *pepla* featuring the character.

Chapters Five and Six extended and developed my discussion of heroic masculinity in mythological action cinema beyond the lifespan of the *peplum*, which in terms of genre production was over by the mid-1960s. I argued that while the *peplum* as I define the concept was a relatively brief phenomenon, its influence in terms of iconography and ideology can be found in the later films *Conan the Barbarian* and *300*, both American-produced and financed but with international casts. Analysing these titles with reference to the earlier cycle provides a useful perspective in illuminating the films themselves and the contexts in which they were produced. Furthermore, the shifting representation of heroic masculinity, as noted in the differences between *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans*, *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, finds new manifestations in *Conan the Barbarian* and *300*, though their evolutionary paths are by no means unconditionally positive or progressive.

In Chapter Five I explored the relationship between the *peplum* genre and *Conan the Barbarian*, which invokes and echoes the former in terms of its imagery and casting, centred on the heavily muscled and exposed male body as incarnated by Arnold Schwarzenegger, probably the only bodybuilder to equal *Hercules* star Steve Reeves in terms of titles, celebrity and, of course, a successful film career. I did not dwell overmuch on Schwarzenegger's Austrian origins, manifested most obviously in his accent, partly

because by the time *Conan the Barbarian* went into production he had successfully Americanised himself, not least through dominating the California-based bodybuilding culture. His role as Conan emphasises his physique and physical performance rather than any verbal dexterity, reflected in his minimal dialogue.

Originating in the 1930s stories by Robert E. Howard, a pulp fiction specialist, which like the *peplum* drew on bodybuilding culture, *Conan the Barbarian* also intersects with ideas of male strength and toughness in circulation at the time of its production and release in the early 1980s. Associated with Reagan-era America, these concepts can be termed reactionary and even fascist, especially in their construction of gender and, especially racial difference. As noted, the promotion and reception of *Conan the Barbarian* invoked repeatedly ideas of the Aryan hero and superior man linked with Nietzsche and Nazi Germany, underlined with an opening quotation from the former in the film itself. It is certainly the case that *Conan the Barbarian* constructs an image of tough white male individualism and heroism comparable with that found in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985), a film associated closely with Reagan's Republican administration and publicly endorsed by the president. If white masculinity is heroised, non-white masculinity is not only denied this status but coded explicitly as a negative, malevolent quality to be conquered and eliminated. Conan's white avenger is compared, contrasted and opposed with the non-white villain Thulsa Doom, played by African-American actor James Earl Jones, their climactic confrontation culminating in the latter's decapitation as Conan's sword slices graphically and repeatedly through his neck.

Yet *Conan the Barbarian* also emphasises a masculine vulnerability and dependence in its title character markedly at odds with the Reaganite hero. As with Romulus in *Duel of the Titans*, Conan is first seen as a helpless child, reliant on the actions of others, and, as an adult, subject to capture, imprisonment, torture and rescue. The prolonged sequence with the crucified Conan evokes images of Christian martyrdom, Hollywood epics such as *Spartacus* (Kubrick, 1960) and *pepla* such as *Hercules*, *Duel of the Titans* and *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. While the *peplum* films did not subject their heroes to literal crucifixion, which could be read as an irreversible diminution of their masculine potency, *Conan the Barbarian* highlights this punishment, emphasising Conan's endurance but also

his wounded body and involuntary confinement. Furthermore, the film's constructions of gender and racial difference, though contentious, are more ambiguous and complex than they first appear. Swordsman Valeria, though seemingly punished for her assumption of traits traditionally coded as exclusively masculine, is accorded a heroic status on a par with that of Conan and arguably saves his life twice over, suggesting she is ultimately the more powerful or at least less vulnerable of the two. Thulsa Doom claims a formative influence over Conan, his actions guiding the transformation or evolution of Conan the helpless child into Conan the warrior. Their final encounter underlines this uneasy interdependence, even as Conan asserts his hard-achieved hard-body masculinity over the more nebulous and subsequently ruptured form of Doom. For all Conan's ultimate victory over Thulsa Doom, white masculinity is shown to be a problematic, troubled construction, while femininity and non-whiteness, though coded as Other and by extension inferior, are recognised as qualities vital to the survival, development and full realisation of heroic masculinity.

I argued further that the tensions and contradictions in the representation of gender and racial difference in *Conan the Barbarian* are readdressed and perhaps even resolved to a degree in the sequel *Conan the Destroyer* (Fleischer, 1984). The latter features a black, female sidekick, Zula, who possesses 'animal' qualities associated with black stereotypes yet her prowess in combat and exposed, unarmoured body give her kinship with Conan, who treats Zula as an equal. Their relationship is notably lacking the romantic aspect found between Conan and Valeria and the concept of an interracial sexual liaison is displaced onto a secondary white male character and treated as a humorous throwaway. In this instance the division between white and black remains distinct, evoking notions of racial purity which could be interpreted as reactionary or even fascistic. Zula does however retain her status as a warrior, her assumption of masculine traits not incurring the same punishment as Valeria in *Conan the Barbarian*. In this respect, Zula represents a compromise that unites blackness and femininity in a form which downplays her sexuality in terms of her interaction with the white hero yet stresses a strength, independence and loyalty that enable her to function, survive and triumph in a white and male-dominated world. She ultimately separates from Conan and assumes a position as head of the new, benevolent queen's guard, incorporated into a social order that channels her combative skills and associated aggression into an approved and constructive role (traditionally regarded as a male province). Ability and strength of character are shown to transcend

ethnic difference and, on this level, racial boundaries and tensions are eliminated. There are however additional limitations to this representation of black femininity. Unlike Thulsa Doom, Zula does not threaten or challenge a white-dominated patriarchy and her subordinate position to Conan during their quest also goes unquestioned. Yet however qualified or compromised, her depiction is by and large positive and arguably even progressive compared to representations of ethnic otherness in later films exploring racial difference in a mythical or classical setting, my prime example of the latter being *300*.

Chapter Six examined the contentious and controversial representation of Spartan masculinity in *300*, which I characterised as unconditionally reactionary. Highlighting the exposed male physique in scenarios of display and action, the film clearly references bodybuilding culture, the *peplum* and the sword-and-sorcery genre as exemplified by *Conan the Barbarian*. The Spartan body or rather bodies are also invested with connotations that appear overtly and unashamedly fascistic. I discussed how this links to the historical Sparta, where any concept of equality or democracy must be qualified to the point where it becomes relatively meaningless by modern standards. The totalitarian, xenophobic ideology associated with this virtual slave state may be disputed yet its cooption by Nazi Germany is a matter of record and was reflected frequently in the reception of *300*. As discussed, the *peplum* genre has been debated in terms of a perceived fascist subtext, its promotion of strong white male bodies linked, however tenuously, with both the Mussolini regime and Nazi ideology, a connection acknowledged and refuted by *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*. The promotion and reception of *Conan the Barbarian* evoked openly Nietzsche, Nazi Germany and the Aryan ideal, though the film itself resists such a straightforward reading. It could be argued that any fascist elements in *300* are inevitable given the nature of Spartan society. I contend, however, that far from suppressing, circumventing or disowning the fascist aspects of historical Sparta, *300* both acknowledges and valorises them.

The *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery genres subject their protagonists to graphic physical punishment but ultimately emphasise survival and reprisal. By contrast, *300* highlights the death of its Spartan warriors, not strictly speaking in combat but massacred from afar by waves of Persian arrows. Far from negating their bodies as sites of heroic masculinity, this

underlines their noble and inspirational sacrifice. Individual Spartan bodies may fall, epitomised by the climactic death of Leonidas, yet the qualities of one Spartan warrior are the qualities of all, as opposed to the unique heroic bodies of the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery genres. I argued further that the notion of sacrifice for state or country can be related to the contemporary West-Middle East conflict, which may also be characterised, however speciously, as a Christian-Muslim, or, as expressed in *300*, white and non-white schism. Compared to depictions of racial difference in the *peplum* and sword-and-sorcery genres, there is no discernible ambiguity or complexity in the representation of the Persian enemy. Where *Conan the Barbarian* depicts white and black bodies in an uneasy, unresolved relationship marked by mutual dependence, *300* places the idealised, heroised white male body in direct opposition to the alien, antagonistic non-white body. Furthermore, *300* offers no critical distance or even commentary on this perspective or, by extension, its attendant subtexts. The film appears to subscribe unconditionally to reactionary and fascist depictions of white masculine potency and authority.

In terms of public circulation and, indeed, commercial success, the digitally enhanced Spartan bodies of *300* could be said to mark the most significant recent development in the evolution of the heroic masculine form first seen in *Hercules*, five decades earlier. The historical Spartans proclaimed themselves the descendents of Hercules and Gerard Butler's dark-haired, bearded and heavily muscled classical hero has clear antecedents in Steve Reeves' Greco-Roman demigod. From this perspective the Spartan form exemplified by Leonidas is not so much a progression as a regression. In drawing uncritically on reactionary concepts of white superiority, non-white degeneracy and physical appearance as moral measure, *300* perpetuates and endorses these discredited stereotypes. Yet the reactionary depiction of heroic masculinity in *300* should not be taken as conclusive evidence that the classical or mythological action film is an intrinsically conservative form. If *Hercules* served as the archetype or blueprint for later *peplum* or *peplum*-influenced films, my subsequent case studies have all offered significant variations on this model, reflecting to whatever extent the wider cinematic, cultural, social or political contexts of their eras. I have argued that these films challenge the ostensibly simplistic patriarchal order promoted in *Hercules* in ways I have identified as both provocative and progressive. *Duel of the Titans* presents masculinity as an evolving, initially vulnerable quality dependent on femininity and a wider social structure. *Jason and the Argonauts*

reconfigures Herculean masculinity as an outmoded, ineffectual quality that must be marginalised and eradicated in favour of a youthful, intellectual yet virile masculinity associated with Jason, a figure represented in *Hercules* as susceptible to feminine wiles and dependent on the title character. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* marks the harmonious reconciliation of Herculean masculinity with domesticity, femininity and society, while reiterating his ability to confront and eliminate all outside threats. *Conan the Barbarian* has been characterised, not least in its promotion, as depicting a quasi-fascist view of white male strength yet a close reading of the film reveals a more qualified and complicated construction of masculinity dependent on both femininity and the non-white other. Thus *300* marks just another stage in an ongoing process I have identified, mapped and analysed, rather than the natural or logical endpoint of my research. The cinematic representation of masculinity initiated by *Hercules* in 1958 will continue to evolve and this thesis will serve as a source and reference point for future debates on the heroic male body.

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O.S.C.A.R. Film/Galatea

Producer: Federico Teti

Director: Pietro Francisci

Screenplay: Ennio De Concini, Pietro Francisci, Gaiò Fratini

Photography: Mario Bava

Production design: Flavio Mogherini

Editing: Mario Serandrei

Music: Enzo Masetti

Runtime: 102 minutes

Cast: Steve Reeves (Hercules), Sylva Koscina (Iole), Fabrizio Mione (Jason), Ivo Garrani (Pelias), Arturo Dominici (Eurystheus), Mimmo Palmara (Iphitus), Lydia Alfonsi (Sybil), Gino Mattered (Orpheus), Gabriele Antonini (Ulysses), Gianna Maria Canale (Antea)

Romolo e Remo (*Duel of the Titans*, 1961)

Titanus/Ajace Produzione Cinematografiche

Producer: Alessandro Jacovoni

Director: Sergio Corbucci

Screenplay: Sergio Corbucci, Luciano Martino, Giorgio Prosperi, Franco Rossetti, Ennio De Concini, Duccio Tessari

Photography: Enzo Barboni, Dario Di Palma

Art director: Saverio D'Eugenio

Editing: Gabriele Varriale

Music: Piero Piccioni

Runtime: 107 minutes

Cast: Steve Reeves (Romulus), Gordon Scott (Remus), Virna Lisi (Julia), Jacques Sernas (Curtius), Massimo Girotti (Tatius), Ornella Vanoni (Tarpeia), Franco Volpi (Amulius), Andrea Bosis (Faustulus), Laura Solari (Rhea Sylvia), Enzo Cerasico (Numa), Piero Lulli (Sulpicius)

Jason and the Argonauts (1963)

Columbia/Morningside

Producer: Charles H. Schneer

Associate producer: Ray Harryhausen

Director: Don Chaffey

Screenplay: Jan Read, Beverley Cross

Photography: Wilkie Cooper

Production design: Geoffrey Drake

Editing: Maurice Rootes

Music: Bernard Herrmann

Runtime: 103 minutes

Cast: Todd Armstrong (Jason), Nancy Kovack (Medea), Gary Raymond (Acastus), Nigel Green (Hercules), Laurence Naismith (Argos), Douglas Wilmer (Pelias), Niall MacGinnis (Zeus), Honor Blackman (Hera), Michael Gwynn (Hermes), Jack Gwillim (Aeëtes), Patrick Troughton (Phineas), John Cairney (Hylas), Andrew Faulds (Phalerus)

Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide (*Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, US: *Hercules and the Captive Women*, 1961)

SPA Cinematografica/C.F.F.P.

Producer: Achille Piazzi

Director: Vittorio Cottafavi

Screenplay: Alessandro Continenza, Vittorio Cottafavi, Duccio Tessari

Photography: Carlo Carlini

Production design: Franco Lolli

Editing: Maurizio Lucidi

Music: Gino Marinuzzi

Runtime: 101 minutes

Cast: Reg Park (Hercules), Fay Spain (Antinea), Ettore Manni (Androcles), Luciano Marin (Hylus), Laura Efrikian (Ismene), Mimmo Palmara (Astor), Salvatore Furnari (Timoteus), Luciana Angelillo (Deianira)

Conan the Barbarian (1982)

De Laurentiis/Universal/Twentieth Century Fox

Producers: Buzz Feitshans, Raffaella De Laurentiis

Director: John Milius

Screenplay: Oliver Stone, John Milius

Photography: Duke Callaghan

Production design: Ron Cobb

Editing: C. Timothy O'Meara

Music: Basil Poledouris

Runtime: 126 minutes

Cast: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Conan), James Earl Jones (Thulsa Doom), Sandahl Bergman (Valeria), Ben Davidson (Rexor), Gerry Lopez (Subotai), Cassandra Gaviola (Witch), Mako (Wizard), Valerie Quenessen (Princess), William Smith (Conan's father), Max Von Sydow (King Osric), Sven Ole Thorsen (Thorgrim), Nadiuska (Conan's mother)

300 (2007)

Warner Bros./Virtual Studios/Legendary Pictures

Producers: Gianni Nunnari, Mark Canton, Bernie Goldmann, Jeffrey Silver

Director: Zack Snyder

Screenplay: Zack Snyder, Kurt Johnstad, Michael B. Gordon

Photography: Larry Fong

Production designer: James Bissell

Editing: William Hoy

Music: Tyler Bates

Runtime: 117 minutes

Cast: Gerard Butler (Leonidas), Lena Headey (Gorgo), Rodrigo Santoro (Xerxes), Dominic West (Theron), David Wenham (Dilios), Vincent Regan (Captain), Michael Fassbender (Stelios), Tom Wisdom (Astinos), Andrew Pleavin (Daxos), Andrew Tiernan (Ephialtes)

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Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan (Samson and the 7 Miracles of the World, Freda, 1961)

Maciste contro il vampiro (Goliath and the Vampires, Giacomo Gentilomo, 1961)

Maciste l'uomo piú forte del mondo (The Strongest Man in the World, Antonio Leonviola, 1961)

Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi (Atlas in the Land of the Cyclops, Leonviola, 1961)

Mamma Roma (Pasolini, 1962)

The Man Who Would Be King (John Huston, 1975)

The Mask of Fu Manchu (Charles Brabin, Charles Vidor, 1932)

Mysterious Island (Cy Endfield, 1961)

Die Nibelungen (Fritz Lang, 1924)

Ocean's Eleven (Lewis Milestone, 1960)

Olympia (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938)

Orlando e i paladini di Francia (Roland the Mighty, Francisci, 1956)

Picnic (Joshua Logan, 1955)

Popeye Meets Hercules (Bill Tytla, 1948)

Poveri ma belli (US: Poor but Handsome, UK: Girl in a Bikini, Dino Risi, 1956)

Predator (John McTiernan, 1987)

Prince of Foxes (Henry King, 1949)

PT-109 (Leslie H. Martinson, 1963)

Pumping Iron (George Butler and Robert Fiore, 1977)

Quo Vadis? (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912)

Quo Vadis (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951)

Raiders of the Lost Ark (Spielberg, 1981)

Rambo: First Blood Part II (George P. Cosmatos, 1985)

La regina di Saba (*The Queen of Sheba*, Francisci, 1952)

Return of the Jedi (Richard Marquand, 1983)

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Jim Sharman, 1975)

Roma: città aperta (*Rome, Open City*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945)

Samson and Delilah (Cecil B. DeMille, 1949)

Scipione l'Africano (*Scipio Africanus*, Carmine Gallone, 1937)

Nel segno di Roma (*Sign of the Gladiator*, Guido Brignone, 1959)

Sergeants 3 (John Sturges, 1962)

The 7th Voyage of Sinbad (Nathan Juran, 1958)

Siren of Atlantis (Gregg Tallas, 1949)

The Son of the Sheik (George Fitzmaurice, 1926)

Spartaco (Giovanni Enrico Vidali, 1913)

Spartacus (Stanley Kubrick, 1960)

Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977)

Stay Hungry (Bob Rafelson, 1976)

La strada (Fellini, 1954)

Superman (Richard Donner, 1978)

The Sword and the Sorcerer (Albert Pyun, 1982)

Tarzan and the Slave Girl (Lee Sholem, 1950)

Tarzan's Fight for Life (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1958)

Tarzan's Greatest Adventure (Guillermin, 1959)

Tarzan's Hidden Jungle (Harold Schuster, 1955)

The Ten Commandments (DeMille, 1956)

Il terrore dei barbari (*Goliath and the Barbarians*, Carlo Campogalliani, 1959)

Il terrore della maschera rossa (Luigi Capuano, 1960)

The Three Stooges Meet Hercules (Edward Bernds, 1962)

The 300 Spartans (Rudolph Maté, 1962)

Il trionfo di Ercole (Francesco Bertolini, 1922)

Triumph des Willens (*Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl, 1935)

Troy (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004)

20 Million Miles to Earth (Nathan Juran, 1957)

Ulisse (*Ulysses*, Camerini, 1954)

Ulisse contro Ercole (*Ulysses against Hercules*, Mario Caiano, 1962)

Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, Mario Bonnard,⁶⁷⁸ 1959)

Ursus (Campogalliani, 1961)

Il vangelo secondo Matteo (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Pasolini, 1964)

Vecchia guardia (Blasetti, 1934)

⁶⁷⁸ Though credited to Bonnard, most of the film was directed by Sergio Leone.

La vendetta di Ercole (Goliath and the Dragon, Cottafavi, 1960)

La vendetta di Ursus (The Mighty Warrior, Capuano, 1961)

The Vikings (Fleischer, 1958)

Village of the Damned (Wolf Rilla, 1960)

The Villain (UK: Cactus Jack, Hal Needham, 1979)

Westworld (Michael Crichton, 1973)

Documentary

Uomini Forti (Strong Men, Steve Della Casa, 2006)