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HOLLYWOOD, THE MODERN ROME: PAGAN SPECTACLES VS CHRISTIAN NARRATIVES

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"Hollywood, the modern Rome: it is pagan sex and violence [...] Cinema is sexual showing, a pagan flaunting. Plot and dialogue are obsolete word-baggage. Cinema, the most eye-intense of genres, has restored pagan antiquity's cultic exhibitionism. Spectacle is a pagan cult of the eye."

– Camille Paglia[1]

Ever since its genesis, cinema has found a spiritual ally in the world of antiquity. The very earliest silent films pounced with gusto and fervour on the chance to depict the ancient past, evident to see in films such as *Samson and Delilah* (1902), *La morte di Socrate* (1909), *Cléopatre* (1910), *Lo schiavo di Cartagine* (1910) and *L' Odissea* (1911). In the words of film scholars Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke, "Within a few months of the first public shows of moving images, George Hatot brought Nero onto the screen trying out poison on his slaves, Thomas Edison filmed the Leander Sisters dancing as Cupid and Psyche, and Marc Klaw and Abraham L. Erlanger made more than fifty film strips of biblical scenes"[2] The appeal and influence of antiquity runs deep in cinema from content to exhibition. The opulent picture palaces built between 1910 and 1940 adopted faux-classical architectural styles from Ancient Greece and Rome, or the façade of pyramids and obelisks from Ancient Egypt, giving the moving-picture experience "seductiveness and aesthetic pedigree"[3] Production companies aligned themselves with antiquity through names such as Apollo Pictures, Venus Film, and Vesuvio Films. Even today in the UK, one of the most popular cinema chains is Odeon, from the Ancient Greek (Ὠδεῖον), meaning "singing place" – buildings built for music and poetry. While some compare movie-going to the pious attendance of Church, perhaps, by self-identification, it is more like the Colosseum, or the Agora – a relic of the pre-Christian past.

[1] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 33.
[2] Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke, "Introduction: Silent Cinema, Antiquity, and the 'Exhaustless Urn of Time' in *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.
[3] Michelakis and Wyke, "Introduction," in *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, 8.

Indeed, what are we to make of this association between cinema and antiquity? Cinema is a quintessentially modernist invention, yet from its conception, it has sought an alliance with the worlds of Ancient Rome, Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia. Scholars often interpret this as a conscious effort to turn a new entertainment frivolity, in otherwise ill-repute, into something respectable and prestigious. Not long after its invention, early cinema sought validation as a 'serious' mode of storytelling partly by aligning itself with the culture-forming Classics, or Greats. This is a perfectly legitimate theory when considering that cinema was, by all evidence, looked upon with disdain by the respectable classes – an amoral and tawdry business, devoid of artistic merit, intellectual sophistication or moral imperative. It is important to note that during this most nascent phase, cinema had little interest in narrative and operated at a purely imagistic level that film scholar Tom Gunning calls, "a cinema of attractions."[4] The pleasures were simple – gazing at body-builders and female dancers, or watching footage of exotic locales that many of the working-class plebian audience would never see, including relics of antiquity such as the Acropolis in *An Excursion in Ancient Greece* (1913). A conscious effort was indeed made to 'clean-up' the reputation of moving-picture shows by introducing virtuous narrative, bringing sensible plot structure and moral messaging to what was previously a plain, amoral and 'primitive' picture. These were adaptations sourced from already established respectable arts such as literature, theatre and, indeed, ancient mythology.

But there is something more at work here. The complaints that forced the narrativisation of cinema were coming from the Christian puritanical middle-class, Victorians aghast and repulsed by the cinema's lack of moral virtue and the cesspool environments in which they were exhibited. One scandalised account from Alfred Döblin goes as follows:

> "Inside the pitch-black, low-ceilinged space a rectangular screen glares over a monster of an audience, a white eye fixating the mass with a monotonous gaze. Couples making out in the background are carried away and withdraw their undisciplined fingers [...] badly smelling workers with bulging eyes; women in musty clothes, heavily made-up prostitutes leaning forward, forgetting to adjust their scarves. Here you can see 'panem et circenses' fulfilled; spectacle as essential bread; the bullfight a popular need."[5]

[4] Tom Gunning, "Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 56-62.
[5] Alfred Döblin, "Das Theatre der kleinen leute," in *Kino-Debatte*, 38.

Quite the scandal, indeed. *Panem et cirenses* ('bread and circuses') is a phrase attributed to the Roman poet Juvenal[6], an expression of disapproval towards superficial distraction at the cost of civic virtue. This sect of society saw a new Colosseum in cinema – an excess of show and depravity for the masses. Therefore, the narrativisation of cinema can also be interpreted as a *Christianisation of cinema*. The revulsion held against cinema, as would be the theory of this essay, was, in fact, the sense of alarm felt by Christian morality towards the recrudescence of an ancient foe: paganism. Since the Christian-Narrativisation of cinema, the medium has experienced overwhelming success in all social spheres and across cultures; it is likely the most successful art in the history of the world. Yet, despite this Christian influence that dethroned early pagan cinema, film has always maintained its rapport with its foundational base image, its genus in pagan spectacle. This spectacle is showy, tawdry, sexual, decadent, hedonistic, and grandiose, and no more does it appear than in the very depiction of pagan civilisation itself. From the very beginning of cinema to this very day, many 'classics', including *Intolerance* (1916), *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Julius Caesar* (1953), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *Cleopatra* (1963) and *Gladiator* (2000), emphasise and accentuate the resplendence, imagistic power and scale of antiquity, of ancient civilisations. These films are often very long, very expensive, very expansive, flamboyant, erotic and sensationalist. They are films of immense show and spectacle, what Steve Neale describes as "the visibility of the visible"[7], and are often bequeathed with golden awards in praise. There is, and likely always will be, huge appetite in the public imagination for such lewd depictions. While cinema continues to idolise the world of antiquity, monotheistic religions still maintain an uneasy relationship with the medium, cautious of its corrupting influence as they threaten censorship and condemnation. I suggest that cinema feels an unconscious, irresistible pull towards antiquity for the same reason that Christians remain wary of its power: an innate human impulse that characterised the decadence and mythological power of paganism.

In film studies scholarship, a distinction is often made between narrative and spectacle, which can be thought of as a horizontal line and a vertical line, respectively. While the narrative moves forward, detailing character development and plot hurdles for the hero to overcome as a horizontal trajectory, the spectacle would be the moment of contemplation, the vertical half within the story that ponders a vista or display, taking in what is often considered an 'excess', perhaps even 'unnecessary' to the story. This often takes the shape of lurid violence, the sexual

[6] Juvenal, Satire 10.81 (ed. note – I. P.).

[7] Steve Neale, quoted by Tom Brown in *Spectacle in "Classical" Cinemas: Musicality and Historicity in the 1930s* (London: Routledge, 2016), 27.

'gaze', the spectacular vista, or the accentuation of technological wonder. I consider this spectacle a *pagan impulse*, one that glorifies the *great seen*; it rejoices in orgiastic display, contemplative scopophilia, and the amoral majesty of *things*. It is the spectacle of the Colosseum or competitive Greek athletics. In G.K. Chesterton's words, "The pagan set out, with admirable sense, to enjoy himself."[8] Narrative, on the other hand, is the adjacent Christian ethic concerning transformation and revelation – the 'moral of the story', the purpose and meaning of the tale usually imbued with messages concerning moral virtue. In cinema, we see repeatedly played out this ancient conflict between Christian and Pagan in the tension between spectacle and narrative. In Paglia's words, it is "Hebrew word worship vs pagan imagism, the great unseen vs the glorified thing."[9]

Hollywood, as the epicentre of industrial film production from around 1912, was the clearest example of a return to a Hellenistic mode of expression since the Renaissance, wherein, like Michelangelo, Donatello and Cellini, the sensual human form was put front and centre again, basking in a homosexual gaze, the power of violent imagery and the morally complex world of ancient mythology. What are we, for example, to make of the moral to the story of the kidnapping of the Sabine women? This moral vortex returned as audiences became transfixed as they gazed upon the Apollonian achievements of the medium, the graceful "to-be-looked-at-ness"[10] of movie stars, to use Laura Mulvey's famous phrase. As with the Renaissance, the "Golden Age of Hollywood" marked a return to the homoerotic glamorisation of the 'Beautiful Boy' so revered in Ancient Greece, alongside the alluring sexual prowess of women. While we celebrate the liberation of gay representation on screen today, anyone familiar with film history knows that homosexual themes and impulses have been laden throughout Hollywood history, as irrepressible as paganism itself. Hollywood, as Kenneth Anger's salacious book *Hollywood Babylon* (1959) makes clear, was a culture replete with debauchery and vice, alongside the idolatry of beauty and strength. Like Ancient Rome, Hollywood was founded by renegades and scoundrels, lawbreakers on the run from Thomas Edison's monopoly of patents on the technology required to make movies. Filmmakers simply fled across country to California – a new Eternal City – and so Hollywood was born. Like Rome, which according to James O'Donnell, "The panoply of religious experience in the Roman world before Constantine was simply bewildering,"[11] Hollywood was truly diverse and eclectic; immigrants from across the

[8] G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K Chesterton, Volume. 1* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 127
[9] Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 61.
[10] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in *Screen* (1975), 62.
[11] James J. O'Donnell, "The Demise of Paganism," in *Traditio*, Vol. 35, 47.

globe came and settled in relative harmony. New US citizens were made in a manner the likes of which the world had not seen since AD 212, when Emperor Caracalla granted all subjects of the Empire Roman citizenship in one fell swoop.

While it is interesting to expound upon the parallels between Hollywood and Ancient Rome, it is the films themselves that are most deserving of attention and make for the most fascinating objects of study. The tension that we witness in films depicting antiquity – between revelling in the orgiastic decadent paganism and the Christian ethic, or repudiation of said revelry – is the very psychodrama of Western civilisation. In Nietzche's formulation, "there has been no greater event than this struggle, this questioning, this mortal enmity and contradiction."[12] While audiences indulge in the on-screen spectacle that Hollywood was so well-equipped and willing to provide, it is the case that narrative resolutions are Christian in the moral spirit. The general formula for this was established as early as *The Roman Orgy* (1911), which depicts, as the title insinuates, a decadent Roman spectacle of "the debauched Emperor" Elagabalus, featuring sacrifice, banquets and orgies. So depraved is the Emperor that he sets lions loose on the guests for his own amusement. Only, per the Christian ethic, this "reign of madness" is overthrown by the Praetorian guard who slay the hedonistic Emperor. Even then, with moral order implemented, the film cannot resist the wanton temptation to showcase the guard lifting Elagabalus' severed heard on spectacle's behalf. This is the basic oscillation that we see in almost all depictions of antiquity on-screen – a pleasurable spoiling in antiquity's excesses, albeit with an eventual Christian resolution that points to the moral ineptitude and inevitable downfall of such activity. A controversial film such as *Caligula* (1979), financed by pornographic magazine Penthouse and featuring unsimulated sex, is perhaps the zenith and most extreme version of this depiction of pagan decadence.

Yet even amongst non-controversial movies, movies considered to be conservative and Christian in their values, this radical impulse exists. During the 1950s, there was a huge surge in depictions of antiquity on film. At a time when American Christian Conservatism was hegemonic and rooted deeply in the culture, Hollywood was as explicit as it had ever been in its appreciation of pagan excess. The convenient excuse for such display was that the film in question, in the end, disowns all that the audience had seen prior as immoral, improper and un-Christian. Major film studios were drawn to epics of antiquity as the ancient world provided a suitable excuse for the flaunting of resource and tawdry spectacle, just as long as the framework was, say, Biblical or featured a resolution fittingly Christian and family-friendly. The extent to

[12] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 35.

which nudity, bare-chested homoeroticism, decadent orgies and gladiatorial violence was permitted, just as long as it was qualified with a moralistic denouement, remains extraordinary. This is exemplified in the film *The Robe* (1953), a story about tribune Marcellus Gallio (Richard Burton) who is tasked with a routine crucifixion of a religious radical. Only, as the audience knows, this is Jesus Christ himself. At first oblivious of any divine provenance, Marcellus is contemptuous of Christ's spreading influence at a time when, as Tacitus describes, Christianity was seen as nothing but "Pernicious superstition."[13] It is not long, however, before he becomes aware of the nature of his crime and guilt consumes him. The narrative of *The Robe* is one of transformation, showcasing the moral journey of a self-serving drunkard of the Empire to a Soldier of Christ. The audience is encouraged to adopt an omniscient attitude over Marcellus in the film, fully aware that, to use Christ's dying words, "they know not what they do." In the opening voice-over of the film, Marcellus declares, "We, the nobles of Rome, are free to live only for our own pleasure. Could any God offer us more?" We watch him strut through Rome's slave market, a proud Roman pleasuring himself with the contemplation of beautiful slaves. Naturally, the film answers "Yes" to Marcellus question, revealing the selfless King of Men and how Marcellus must learn the virtue of sacrifice, refusing loyalty to Emperor Caligula in a dramatisation of Christian martyrdom. Yet, the film also encourages, through the vitality and scope of its images, identifcation with Marcellus' power and the pleasure of the slave market – objectifying helpless slaves in a procession. In Paglia's words, "Images are always eluding moral control [...] Images are archaic projection, earlier than words and morals."[14] While Christ is central to the story, the film tactfully avoids any depiction of his likeness, often obscured by crowds or camera angles. Christ is the great unseen, whereas the Roman spectacle is made *extremely visible*. *The Robe* was the first film to employ Cinemascope, making for a wider, more impressive exhibition. It also shot in Technicolor, harnessing technical innovations to accentuate the spectacle. The strength of the images, which are memorable and distinctive, compared to the weakness of the narrative reveals a pagan impulse never convincingly squashed by the ostensibly Christian surface. The radical nature of the epic of antiquity is the extent to which it aligns itself to the *seen*, and not the invisible chastity of Christ. The pleasures are wholly transgressive in this sense and loyal to the pagan ego, moments of Sadean liberalisation in a genre known for heavy-handed and often mawkish Christian messaging, just as we get at the end of *The Robe* when Marcellus ventures into the

[13] Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (London: Penguin Classics, 1973), xx44.
[14] Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 139

Kingdom of God within the clouds. What we observe in *The Robe* is a conflict between *what we see* and *what we are told* which generates a sort of cognitive cancelling out. Those who want to see a cerebral Christian moral, as conservative audience members did during the 1950s, see a story with an agreeable conclusion. Whereas those uninterested in religion, like actor Richard Burton, who was an atheist, enjoy the transgressive and salacious spectacle.

Jump fifty years later to *Gladiator* (2000) and we can see almost exactly the same dynamic at work. Despite the assumption that the 21st century is a much more secular, atheistic and liberal era, Christian ethics run deep in the film, though perhaps not as deep as pagan imagery. The film concerns a loyal and courageous general of Rome, Maximus Decimus Meridius (Russell Crowe), leading the Roman armies against barbarians in Germania. Informed by Emperor Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) of his desire to make him Protector of Rome and convert the Empire back into a Republic, he is betrayed by the ambitious son of Marcus Aurelius, Commodus (Joaquin Pheonix), who commits patricide against his father to assume the role of Emperor. Maximus ends up a slave and a gladiator but is determined to get revenge for the murder of his wife and child against Commodus. Despite espousing his loyalty to Rome and praying to pagan Gods, Maximus is very much the archetypal Christian hero – a committed family man, reluctant to fight, and quite prepared to sacrifice himself for the greater good. Upon his succession, Commodus re-introduces gladiatorial combat, which had been outlawed by the wise Marcus Aurelius, intending to keep the masses distracted from his callousness and incompetence. Fighting his way to the Colosseum, Maximus expresses his disgust for the spectacle he is forced to contribute to on a number of occasions, declaring "Marcus Aurelius had a dream that was Rome. This is not it. This is not it!" and pointing to the cheering crowd waiting for blood. The film quite literally depicts *panem et circenses* as Commodus' men hurl bread into the crowd. This is the film's Christian moral – its narrative disdain of blood sports, of the moral bankruptcy to such an act. Yet, unsurprisingly for a film called *Gladiator,* the film is renowned for its depiction of Colosseum combat, showcasing wonderful fight choreography. Not without a bloodthirst of its own, the cinema audience holds an identical position to that of the pagan crowds in the Colosseum, enjoying the spectacle of death. With the assistance of newly pioneered CGI, Rome is brought to life as a major spectacle on-screen, with characters declaring, "I had no idea men could build such things." It is quite revealing that the depiction of Rome in the film bares distinct similarity to the opening scenes of Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will* (1935), wherein the audience comes to look upon the city by descending from lofty clouds above. Both are imbued with pagan qualities, of the love of ostentatious display, one a depiction of pagan civilisation the other influenced by it. Despite the film's

obvious and apparent affinity for gladiatorial combat and the glory of Rome, the film espouses a Christian moral about sacrifice. Held in a crucifix manner, Maximus is pierced in the side of his chest like Christ before him. It is by this wound that he dies, but not before achieving his revenge by murdering Commodus. The conclusion is not much different to that of *The Robe*, depicting the death of a martyr who enters the afterlife before the camera pulls up from the now-empty Colosseum to a passionate sky imbued with numinous qualities. We are led to believe that Maximus' sacrifice helps to bring about the unhistorical fantasy of a new Roman Republic. In tandem with the numinous sky, the film seems to be alluding to the arrival of a better, more righteous, more Christian future.

The conflict between paganism and monotheism was inevitable in as much as their philosophies were of a starkly contrasting nature. One preached a singular God with one truth and the word of a saviour who speaks of loving thy neighbour and healing the sick. Paganism, on the other hand, as the spears of Rome testified, too, idolised power and the ego, an Imperial march in which the Gods were made in the image of man, in all their flaws and desires, and not vice-versa. What we see in cinematic depictions of antiquity, particularly those coming out of Hollywood, is a dramatic oscillation between pagan flaunting of power and humbling Christian morals. While the ethics of the films in question are seemingly clear-cut, the strong presence of spectacle complicates the nature of the viewing experience and forces us to consider the enduring presence of antiquity in our contemporary lives. It seems that the conflict between Paganism and Christianty in the last decades of the 4th century remains unresolved in the human psyche. While it is said that "antiquity helped legitimise cinema"[15], it also seems to be the case that cinema has legitimised and continues to legitimise antiquity.

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Note by the editorial board: This publication was included in the *Antiquity beyond Antiquity* section for reasons of thematic coherence. Unlike the remaining texts in its section, this text did not go through our blind peer review process, which is due to characteristics specific to the text's genre.