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THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN AMERICAN CINEMA AFTER 1945

The importance of the Roman republic for the U.S. constitution and for the country's formative years is a matter of general knowledge. By contrast, the popular American perception of Rome as an empire differs considerably from the idealized image of the republic. We may adduce two general reasons for this, one historical, the other religious. The first lies in the fact that with Julius Caesar Rome had become a monarchy—a form of government which, as historians from Tacitus to Gibbon have shown, frequently leads to tyranny. Given the United States' successful emancipation from the British empire, such a view is not surprising. It also fits in with the second reason, one prevalent not only in the U.S. This is the part which Romans played in the condemnation and death of Jesus. Since Pontius Pilate, the local administrator of imperial Roman government, allowed the crucifixion to take place and his soldiers carried it out, Romans are "bad guys" in the fiction and popular culture of Christian societies almost by necessity.

Military power and excessive luxury have been regarded as the two major contributing factors of Rome's fall since Montesquieu published his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* in 1734. His perspective echoes that of the ancient Romans themselves, primarily that of Sallust. The moralizing historian, who was to influence Tacitus' negative perspective on the imperial system, attributes Rome's decline to *luxuria* and *lubido dominandi*. Late republican and especially imperial Rome has thus come to be an almost archetypal—as well as stereotypical—society characterized by might and vice. The empire's might is embodied in the megalomaniacal tyranny of its rulers (what Germans used to call *Caesarenwahn*), in its military force, and in the exploitation of slaves, while luxury, lurid sex, gladiatorial games, and the persecution of Christians are all seen as proof of Rome's moral decline and foreshadow its fall.¹

¹ For an overview of such stereotypes in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British and American popular culture ("toga plays" and silent films) see Mayer 1–22. The contrast of pagan Romans to Jews or Christians (or both) in popular melodrama may be observed in the intellectual tradition of the nineteenth century

That much of this perspective is unhistorical hardly needs emphasizing.²

In the U.S. the negative view of imperial Rome has received its widest dissemination in the cinema, with the honorable exception of Hollywood's last grand-scale Roman epic, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). What makes these films worthy of our attention, even when they contain predictable plotlines, anachronisms, and any number of historical inaccuracies, are their modern overtones. References to contemporary or recent events which underlie American films set in ancient Rome indicate that the cinema has played a more important part in the reception of Rome in the twentieth century than academics have generally realized (cf. Winkler 137–38). For this reason the films deserve serious consideration from scholars working in the classical tradition and from teachers who wish to point out the continuing presence of ancient Rome in the modern media, the primary sources for many of their students' "knowledge" of the past. The following pages will trace what may well be the most important aspect of the popular reception of imperial Rome in American films made after World War II: Rome as an analogy to fascist Germany.

I. MILITARY TYRANNY AND RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

The fundamental theme of American films set in imperial Rome is that of power inevitably leading to corruption. The standard image of the Roman empire presents a military dictatorship which ruthlessly exterminates all resistance to its dominance and enslaves the conquered. There is little if any trace of the idealism with which Virgil had his Anchises extol Roman statecraft, urging the Romans to rule over other nations but to subdue only the haughty and to spare the defeated (*Aen.* 6.851–853). The words of Marcus Crassus to the Greek slave Antoninus in *Spartacus* (1960) reveal the extent

as well; cf. Matthew Arnold's "Hebraism and Hellenism" and "Porro Unum Est Necessarium," originally chapters 4 and 5 of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Arnold had prepared an edition of his works for the American market in 1883. On his dichotomy see Anderson 176–179, 203–204, and 268–270 (notes).

² On the tolerant nature of much of Roman society in the early empire see, e.g., Gibbon 1.34–39; on Roman religion, which was polytheistic and as such the opposite of the exclusiveness of Judaism and Christianity, see Gibbon's famous chapters XV and XVI (Gibbon 1.487–567 and 2.3–80), put into context and defended by Momigliano 2–4. As non-Christian Roman sources reveal, to most Romans the life and death of Jesus were insignificant events. For a recent overview of Roman attitudes toward Christians see Wilken, with additional references.

and oppressive nature of the power which Rome exerts over the world:

There, boy, is Rome—there is the might, majesty, the terror of Rome. There is the power that bestrides the known world like a colossus. No man can withstand Rome, no nation can withstand her—how much less a boy? . . . There's only one way to deal with Rome, Antoninus: you must serve her, you must abase yourself before her, you must grovel at her feet, you must—love her. Isn't that so, Antoninus?

The paradoxical juxtaposition of the words “must” and “love” conveys the impossibility of resistance to or escape from Rome's limitless power. The fact that a Roman army is marching out of the city during this scene visually reinforces the meaning of Crassus' speech. His words receive added poignancy in that they are addressed not merely to a slave but also to someone whom the master wants to seduce. To puritan America, Crassus' bisexuality, as expressed in the film's “oysters and snails” scene immediately preceding this one, is a particularly strong indication of moral corruption resulting from unrestrained power. With a deliberate echo of Shakespeare, the film's Crassus comes close to resembling Rome's most famous—or infamous—strongman.³

A visual parallel to this verbal description of Rome as a power-driven military empire occurs as late as 1965, at the end of the era of Hollywood's gigantic epics. Early in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, a film about the life and death of Christ, writer-director George Stevens emphasizes the oppression of the Jews before Jesus begins his messianic work among the people of Judaea. Our first glimpse of the Romans reinforces the somber mood present in the film at this stage, for Stevens shows us the alliance of two evil powers. We watch King Herod Antipas dictate a message to the Roman governor (“Inform him that the eagle of Rome has been torn down and desecrated by a Jerusalem mob”) and hear the noise of that off-screen mob. The sounds from the crowd then begin to be drowned out on the soundtrack by the heavy tread of boots, and the close-up of Herod's face on the screen dissolves to an image of the Roman army marching straight toward the viewer and passing a dead body on a cross by the roadside without paying the slightest attention to him. While the sounds of marching go on, Stevens superimposes shots

³ Cassius on Caesar at Shakespeare, *Jul. Caes.* 1.2.133–134: “he doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus.”

of billowing black smoke rising from burning ruins and of the aftermath of a slaughter over the continuing shot of the Roman army marching and eventually entering Jerusalem. With utter economy, and in no more than a few seconds of screen time, Stevens leads us from King Herod's palace directly to the Romans, emphasizing the speed, efficiency, and ruthlessness of their response to the mob's rising. "Let these men be an example to all who challenge the peace of Rome," the Roman commander proclaims, with irony intended in the word "peace." The realistic-looking Roman uniforms in this film, which consist largely of leather and whose predominant color is a subdued brown, reveal the seriousness with which Stevens approaches his subject. He avoids any trace of colorful outfits, resplendent with gleaming metal, feathered helmets, and bright-red cloaks, which most of Hollywood's Roman films show us. The scene described, telling in its very brevity and accomplished technique, is a striking moment in this long film and an exemplary distillation of the tradition of Hollywood's portrayal of imperial Roman might.

Throughout American film history, with the obvious exception of comedy, this is the standard way in which audiences have come to see the Roman empire. The moral aspect inherent in the theme of militarism and imperialism provides viewers with immediately understandable drama and is therefore more important to filmmakers than historical accuracy. If the Roman empire is a symbol of oppression, its capital is inevitably the center of that evil and corruption which is symptomatic of the arrogance of luxury and power.⁴ In the 1959 version of *Ben-Hur* the hero says to Pontius Pilate after the death of Messala, his boyhood friend who had become his implacable enemy after returning from Rome and campaigning with the Roman army: "The deed was not Messala's. I knew him well, before the cruelty of Rome spread in his blood. Rome destroyed Messala." His words summarize the general American view of imperial Rome and are an aural equivalent to Stevens' visual presentation described above. As a result of this perspective, the struggles of the protagonists in Hollywood's Roman films against their oppressors develop in purely American terms. Their fights are quests for political independence and spiritual freedom or both. Hence Hollywood regularly superimposes modern ideas and ideals, such as democracy and "the holy cause of freedom," as the Decla-

⁴ On the historical implications of this see Romilly 42–62 ("*Hybris* in Politics").

ration of Independence had called it, on its historical narratives. When Emperor Tiberius in *The Robe* (1953) characterizes "man's desire to be free" as "the greatest madness of them all," he only proves himself to be thoroughly un-American. Liberty, often taking the form of a rather simple-minded patriotism, makes the pursuit of happiness possible and is the chief virtue extolled in Hollywood's historical films, not just the Roman ones. The films of Cecil B. DeMille are perhaps the best illustration of this. And American audiences can readily be counted on to identify emotionally with the meek and the persecuted and to root for the underdogs in their fight for liberation.

More than on a political-historical level, American films address the topic of evil Rome on the level of religion, most prominently in the conflict between paganism on the one hand and either Judaism or Christianity on the other. As the films tell it, Rome has acquired political power through militarism and imperialism and now upholds it by the same means. Unavoidably, this leads to clashes of the secular and the spiritual and to the struggle of the new against the old. The films focus on religious incompatibilities, which modern audiences readily grasp, in order to illustrate ethnic, cultural, and moral differences. Such conflicts, although set in the distant past, appear in thinly disguised contemporary terms.⁵ Ironically, and anachronistically, since the U.S. has traditionally considered itself as one nation under God—that is to say, under the Christian god—the subject of Christianity and its struggle against paganism may appear even in a film set before the birth of Christ. The prologue to *Spartacus* is an example. Its modern overtones are immediately apparent:

In the last century before the birth of the new faith called Christianity, which was destined to overthrow the pagan tyranny of Rome and bring about a new society, the Roman republic stood at the very center of the civilized world. "Of all things fairest," sang the poet, "first among cities and home of the gods is golden Rome." Yet even at the zenith of her pride and power the republic lay fatally stricken with the disease called human slavery. The age of the dictator was at hand, waiting in the shadows for the event to bring it forth.

⁵ Cf. Hirsch 29 and 73, adducing Edmund Wilson's review of Lloyd C. Douglas's 1942 novel *The Robe* (" 'You Can't Do This to Me!' Shrilled Celia"; reprinted in Wilson 204–208), on the disadvantages of presenting antiquity in merely one-dimensional modern guise. For the record, the title of Wilson's short essay is a combination of two separate phrases from the novel (Douglas 362) and does not occur in the form quoted.

Here the symptom for the disease of proud and powerful Rome is slavery rather than what ancient and modern Christians consider its false or idolatrous religion, but the reference to Christianity enables the filmmakers to present a Christ-like Spartacus and to assign to his pagan foes the morally wrong side. As usual, Roman religion is shown to be in opposition to Christianity and for that reason is unequivocally associated with tyranny. The prologue concludes with a reference to Spartacus "dreaming the death of slavery, two thousand years before it finally would die," a clear allusion to Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. What Spartacus could not accomplish, Americans did. The prologue implies that America, Christian and free, represents the culmination point of history, at least as far as the Western hemisphere is concerned. The protagonist even puts into practice the most ringing restatement of the American commitment to freedom, made by President Kennedy in his inaugural address the year following the film's release: "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."⁶

II. *QUO VADIS* AND FASCISM

The parallels to modern history in the image of imperial Rome become most pronounced in films made after World War II. During and after the time that the U.S., now expanded into a world empire, had been fighting no less than three aggressive and imperialist empires more or less simultaneously—Germany, Italy, and Japan—some Hollywood films set in the Roman empire reflect an awareness of the ideology of the two twentieth-century empires which trace their roots back to the Romans. In this way the standard image of Rome's evil empire becomes much more pointed. In particular, the Roman empire can now be identified with a specific modern one—Nazi Germany. Hollywood's first grand post-war Roman spectacle, MGM's *Quo Vadis* (1951), which began production five years after the end of World War II in Europe, is the best example of this.

In *Quo Vadis* religious and political conflicts are intended to illustrate the moral decline of Rome which foreshadows the eventual

⁶ Cf. the words with which Alex North, the film's composer, described his approach to its subject: "I decided . . . to conjure up the atmosphere of pre-Christian Rome . . . in terms of my own contemporary, modern style—simply because the theme of *Spartacus*, the struggle for freedom and human dignity, is every bit as

fall of its empire, an obvious analogy to fascist Germany. Throughout the film we can observe such analogies both visually and verbally. Its hero, the Roman commander Marcus Vinicius, will eventually renounce his immoral pagan ways and embrace Christianity. This is an obligatory learning process, set in motion by his love for a Christian maiden as chaste and devout as she is attractive. As long as he is an unregenerate pagan, however, his language points directly to the fascist rhetoric with which American audiences had become familiar during the war: "Just as long as there's money to pay the army, Rome will stand forever. That I'm sure of." And: "Conquest . . . It's the only method of uniting and civilizing the world under one power—you have to spill a little blood to do it." Nothing like these words appears in Henryk Sienkiewicz's 1896 novel, on which the film was based. After World War II Hollywood presents the "civilizing" mission of Rome as that of a master race imposing its rule and its ideology on other nations by force of arms. "A man must be a soldier," Vinicius will say later in the film.

Fascist totalitarianism is, in fact, the very starting point of *Quo Vadis*. It opens with shots of the Roman army returning victorious, while a narrator explains to the audience that "with this [military] power inevitably comes corruption." He then describes the totalitarian system: "No man is sure of his life. The individual is at the mercy of the state. Murder replaces justice. Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to bondage. . . there is no escape from the whip and the sword." Images of prisoners of war, pulling wagons loaded with booty and either being whipped on by Roman soldiers or collapsing and being trampled into the dust, accompany these words. Within two years, audiences could hear a similar conviction from Marcellus Glabrio, the hero of *The Robe*, a figure comparable to Vinicius in his development. Early on he says: "Worlds are built on force, not charity. Power is all that counts." The film closes with his indictment before Caligula of a Rome pursuing "the course of aggression and slavery that have brought agony and terror and despair to the world."

Words to similar effect had appeared in some of the films in the *Why We Fight* series of propaganda films which Hollywood, in co-operation with the Office of War Information's Department of Motion Pictures, produced in 1942 and 1943, largely from enemy footage. They were required viewing for all American soldiers,

relevant in today's world as it was then" (quoted from Karlin 294).

intended to enhance their historical and political education and their fighting morale. Director Frank Capra was the general supervisor of these films.⁷ Part Three of the series, *Divide and Conquer* (1943), contains this quotation (in English translation) from Adolf Hitler: "There will be a class of subject alien races; we need not hesitate to call them slaves." Earlier in the film, a title card had displayed this text: "The Nazi bid to smash the world into slavery was on." The modern conquered nations who we are informed surrendered their subjects to Nazi bondage include Czechoslovakia, Poland, Holland, Belgium, and France. Later on, narrator Walter Huston sums up the reaction of the people of Paris to their occupiers' rule in these words: "When the people of Paris come to the streets again, it is to hear [via loudspeakers] the voice of dictators, telling them what they must do, how they must live, what they must say, what they must think, telling them how to be slaves." The use of the term "slaves," which recurs frequently in the *Why We Fight* series, is revealing: it is no less than a veiled reference to the ancient slaveholding society of Rome. *Prelude to War* (1942), the first film in the series, quotes Vice President Henry Wallace saying on May 8, 1942: "This is a fight between a free world and a slave world." This kind of fight is standard procedure for the plots of Hollywood's Roman films.

The first grand sequence in *Quo Vadis* recreates Vinicius' triumphal procession through the Forum before Nero and his court. This sequence contains obvious analogies to modern fascism, which reinforce the film's theme visually. It is worth remembering that the novel contains no such scene. Its hero is not a commander but, more realistically, a military tribune and, as such, neither a victorious conqueror nor eligible to hold a triumph.⁸ The huge mass of people present on the screen is meant to evoke viewers' memories of newsreel and documentary footage of fascist assemblies and parades. It

⁷ On the production history of the series see Capra's autobiography (Capra 359–395). His book is notoriously unreliable (on its origin and nature see McBride 645–653), and his account should be supplemented by that given at McBride 455–482. On the inclusion of non-documentary footage in the *Why We Fight* films see McBride 479–482.

⁸ Since a triumph required the *triumphator* to hold *imperium* (Liv. 28.38.4, Val. Max. 2.8.5), during the principate only an emperor or an emperor together with an associate, as in the case of Vespasian and Titus in 71 A.D., could celebrate a triumph, even if he had not been in the field himself. Cinematic triumphs such as those in *Quo Vadis* or *Ben-Hur* are therefore not completely accurate renderings of Roman practice.

is instructive to juxtapose scenes from *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's artistic documentary of the Nazi party rally of 1934, or from *Prelude to War* (which contains footage from Riefenstahl's film) with the triumphal sequence in *Quo Vadis*.⁹ A theme common to all films mentioned here is the appearance of dictators at a window or balcony above the crowd. The triumphal rally as depicted in *Quo Vadis* is a historical impossibility for Neronian Rome in that the Forum was far too much built up to accommodate such an immense mass of people, nor did the city possess any other suitable space in the vicinity of the imperial palaces which would have been large enough for the crowd seen on the screen. As *Prelude to War* with its footage of German, Italian, and Japanese mass rallies makes clear, fascist assemblies are the obvious inspiration for the triumph in *Quo Vadis*. By contrast, the triumphal sequence in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* shows a different picture of much greater historical accuracy: considerably fewer people are present for Emperor Commodus' procession through the Forum Romanum.

III. MOBS AND EAGLES

Two years after *Quo Vadis*, the mob scene in Joseph Mankiewicz's film of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1953), in which Mark Antony speaks over Caesar's dead body, resembles fascist rallies as well: the crowd yelling in unison, their arms raised. Since Antony is about to "unleash the dogs of war," the scene may even have carried overtones, at least in some viewers' minds, of the infamous moment in February of 1943 when Goebbels had asked the German people amassed in the Berlin *Sportpalast*, "Do you want total war?" Mankiewicz's Roman mob is as susceptible to demagoguery as the mob in Nazi Germany.¹⁰ Mass scenes such as those in *Quo Vadis* and *Julius Caesar* visually represent the triumph of the

⁹ See Capra 362–368 on Riefenstahl's film as inspiration for his approach to the *Why We Fight* films, but cf. McBride 466–467.

¹⁰ Cf. Geist 223–224 on political overtones in *Julius Caesar*. The presence of John Houseman, its producer and a co-founder with Orson Welles of the Mercury Theatre, provides a link to Welles's 1937 modern-dress stage adaptation of the play as a comment on the rise of Hitler and fascism; see Leaming 170–172, with excerpts from Welles's press release, also Callow 324 (Welles on the mob in his production) and Welles and Bogdanovich 339. Cf. Callow 325, quoting the production's lighting director on staging and lighting patterns "based on the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg." Around the time of Mankiewicz's film Welles was planning a modern-dress film version of the play to be "shot like a newsreel" (Welles, quoted at Leaming 474); cf. Welles and Bogdanovich 302.

fascist will. But *Quo Vadis* is much more explicit than *Julius Caesar*. In 1951 none of the adults in the audience would have overlooked the implications of Nero's repeated raised-arm salute to the people and the troops, particularly since they follow the earlier appearance of the *fascies* on either side of his throne and the huge eagle hovering above it. In American cinema the political significance of the raised-arm salute goes back to the release of *The Last Days of Pompeii* in 1935. The educational guide to this film had asked school children the following two questions, among others: "What form of salute was used by the Romans? In what countries are similar salutes now demanded by the government?" (quoted from Wyke 1995:151). Very likely, a number of the students who had been asked these questions later fought in World War II and eventually watched *Quo Vadis* as well. Many of them, in turn, would have seen instances of this salute in the *Why We Fight* series, particularly in *Prelude to War*, which had described the rise of fascism. On the initiative of President Roosevelt *Prelude to War* was even put into general release to American theatres and reached a wide audience.¹¹

Both *fascies* and eagles are prominent symbols of fascist ideology. To the Romans the eagle was the primary symbol of their power, as the Augustan sardonyx cameo with an eagle holding wreath and palm branch in its claws perhaps illustrates best.¹² This iconography of power has continued until modern times. After 1945 Hollywood loosely, and not always consistently, patterned its Roman eagles on the eagles of fascism, particularly those of Nazi Germany. Their posture, often squat and square-looking, differs enough from that of the American eagle, wings spread wide, to make confusion unlikely.¹³ Eagles regularly appear in prominent

¹¹ Thus Capra 384 and 388–389; contrast McBride 475 and 479, Koppes and Black 124–125.

¹² Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria; an impressive color illustration at Simon, Plate 13. Cf. also, among numerous other representations, the sardonyx cameo showing the apotheosis of Claudius, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

¹³ That the American eagle is meant to be different from ancient Roman eagles becomes evident, for instance, from the letter of April 18, 1806, by Benjamin Henry Latrobe to Charles Willson Peale about the huge eagle, with a wing span of fourteen feet, which was intended for the Hall of Representatives in the Washington Capitol. To Latrobe's horror, sculptor Giuseppe Franzoni was going to make "an Italian, or a Roman or a Greek eagle" rather than "an American bald Eagle," but was prevailed upon to alter his design (quotation from Norton 140–141). In an August, 1806, letter to Thomas Jefferson, Latrobe considered the eventual result to be greater than any classical model: "When it is completed there is not in ancient or modern sculpture, an eagle's head, which in dignity, spirit, or drawing is superior

association with the emperor and his court. In *Quo Vadis*, for instance, when he surveys the fire which devastated much of Rome in 64 A.D. and then recites his poetry while playing the lyre, Nero is wearing a cloak decorated all over with images of eagles holding victory wreaths.¹⁴

Within three years of the release of *Quo Vadis* audiences encountered an even more immense eagle and again the *fascēs* as throne decorations in *The Robe* and in its sequel, *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954); a few years later a large eagle appeared behind Tiberius' throne in the triumph sequence of *Ben-Hur*.¹⁵ In Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* the very first image, immediately after the MGM lion, is a huge eagle banner which fills the screen and over which the film's title and credits appear. In its first sequence we see military officers patrol the streets of the dictator's Rome, with eagles stitched on the back of their cloaks, and realize that the director hints at life under dictatorship in terms of modern totalitarianism. Mankiewicz consistently uses eagles in association with Caesar as symbols of

to Franzoni's." (I owe this reference to my colleague Egon Verheyen.) The eagle was destroyed when the British burned the Capitol in 1814. On Latrobe's design of a statue of Liberty "with an Eagle by her side" see Miller 41–42.

¹⁴ In the film—but not in Sienkiewicz's novel—Nero's responsibility for the fire of Rome, for which there is no ancient evidence as there is none for his "fiddling while Rome burns" (on which Gwyn 455 note 128), leads directly to his overthrow, although Nero ruled for another four years. The film also omits to inform its viewers that Nero's successor Galba, announced to the people as restorer of justice and freedom, was himself overthrown after no more than six months of rule and that the following year saw civil war and the rapid succession of three more emperors. This silence is, however, necessary to allow for the greatest possible contrast between the defeat of Nero the monster and the victory of the good side. On Nero and the fire of Rome see, e.g., Sordi 29–35, with references to the ancient sources. On Nero as typical tyrant in the history of Western political thought see Gwyn. An additional, and in retrospect rather amusing, example of the American appropriation of Nero as tyrant for political purposes are the following words of Barry Goldwater in an interview with Gore Vidal: "In fact, I've always been in favor of teaching Communism in schools. Show the kids what we're up against. Naturally I'd want a good course in American history to balance it. After all, the only way you're going to beat Communism is with a better idea, like Nero and the Christians . . . you know? He couldn't stamp 'em out, because there was that idea they had. Well, that's what we've got to have" (Vidal 1961, quoted from Vidal 1993: 834; ellipsis in original).

¹⁵ This is standard iconography in Hollywood; a prominent earlier example is Nero's throne in DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932). For *The King of Kings* (1926) DeMille had a bronze eagle 37 feet high built for Pontius Pilate (Higham 1973: 166). DeMille was himself once caricatured as an American eagle; illustration at Higham 1973: 273. There are altogether hundreds of eagles in Hollywood's Roman films, often placed quite ingeniously in historically rather unlikely surroundings.

his dictatorial power. A servant in Caesar's house has an eagle decoration not on the back but on the front of his tunic because he is facing the camera; obviously the image was important enough to Mankiewicz to make it clearly visible to the audience. Moreover, Caesar's chair is decorated with an eagle rising above its backrest, and when Mark Antony sits down in it after Caesar's assassination and before the scene in which the triumvirate makes up its lists of proscriptions, the viewer begins to realize that the age of terror and bloodshed is not over. The most ingenious example of this symbol in Mankiewicz's film is the eagle-shaped clasp with which Caesar fastens his cloak at his throat before leaving for that fateful senate meeting on the Ides of March.

IV. NERO AS HITLER

In a recent article Maria Wyke has argued that *Quo Vadis* presents imperial Rome as a precursor of Mussolini's Rome (Wyke 1994). With this she is correct in that Mussolini had styled himself and his empire on ancient Rome.¹⁶ Far more than to fascist Italy, however, *Quo Vadis* refers its audience to Hitler's Germany. Not least the popular perception throughout history of Nero as the Antichrist reinforces this. In the prologue to *Quo Vadis* this analogy serves as lead-in to the film's plot ("In the reign of the Antichrist known to history as the Emperor Nero. . .").¹⁷ But to Americans the reincarnation of the Antichrist in the first half of the twentieth century was not Mussolini or, for that matter, Emperor Hirohito, but Adolf Hitler, their arch-enemy in World War II, whose Third Reich had taken its very name from a succession of empires going back to the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation and thus all the way back to ancient Rome. (As Richard Wagner once observed in "Was ist deutsch?", in their longing for glory Germans can usually dream only of something similar to the restoration of the Roman empire [Lorenz 332]). The ubiquity of Nazis in American mass media on

¹⁶ On fascist Rome and its architecture see, e.g., Kostof, especially 7–40, and now Quartermaine. Cf. also Bondanella 172–206 and 266–269 (references) and Canfora 76–103 ("Cultura classica e fascismo in Italia"). Perhaps the most revealing (as well as ridiculous) piece of grandiose architecture which indicates the imperial aspirations of fascist Rome was the huge column, with enemy tanks embedded in it, in the Campo Mussolini. This column was modeled on the *columna rostrata* of C. Duilius in the Forum Romanum, a commemoration of his victory over the Carthaginians at Mylae in 260 B.C.

¹⁷ On Nero as devil see Gwyn 430, 443, and 451–452; on Nero as Antichrist Gwyn 452–453, McGinn 45–54 and *passim*, Fuller 28–29, and Wright 16.

any level long after the war attests to the lasting American fascination with German fascism as archetypal evil. In the 1950's and 1960's Hollywood turned out large enough numbers of grand-scale World War II films alongside its Roman epics to satisfy any audience's demands for huge spectacles and hissable villains. From this perspective, evil Romans and ice-cold Nazis are kindred cinematic spirits. And after 1945 the standard exclamation "Hail, Caesar!" in Hollywood's Roman films, usually accompanied by the raised-arm salute, echoes the familiar German "Heil Hitler!" even in the linguistic similarity of both expressions.¹⁸

In *Quo Vadis*, another major parallel to Nazism may be found in the cult of the emperor. Throughout the film Nero is regarded as a son of Jupiter, addressed as "Divinity," and treated accordingly; moreover, he believes himself to be a god on earth as well. But this aspect of Neronian culture is unhistorical: Roman emperors, including Nero, did not consider themselves to be gods while they were alive and did not receive or encourage divine rites in their honor at Rome. As Edward Gibbon put it in 1776: "the imperious spirit of the first Caesar too easily consented to assume, during his lifetime, a place among the tutelar deities of Rome. The milder temper of his successor declined so dangerous an ambition, which was never afterwards revived, except by the madness of Caligula and Domitian" (Gibbon 1.80; for further discussion see Gibbon 1.79–81). But American soldiers learned in 1942 and 1943 from the *Why We Fight* films that divinities were back in earthly power. In *Prelude to War* narrator Huston informs his audience that "to the Japanese people, the emperor is God. Taking advantage of their fanatical worship of the god-emperor, it was no great trick to take away what little freedom they had ever known." Later Huston summarizes the German perspective on this over footage of Josef Goebbels and Julius Streicher presumably expounding their creed: "Our Führer is the intermediary between his people and the throne of God. Everything the Führer utters is religion in the highest sense." Shortly afterwards a grade-school teacher leads her students in a new song which contains their pledge to obey the Führer, their god, unto death ("Für den Führer bis zum Tod, denn er ist, er ist unser

¹⁸ Although it is a standard ingredient in Roman films and denotes militarism and power, the raised-arm salute does not carry political connotations every time it appears. Of all the variations of this form of greeting which occur in the cinema, doubtless the silliest appears in *Salome* (1953), when King Herod's palace guards salute a contingent of arriving Romans.

Gott"). And in the next installment of the series, *The Nazis Strike*, Huston observes that the Germans' "passion for conquest reached its historical climax when Adolf Hitler enthroned himself as god and the German Führer."¹⁹ Whereas in pre-War cinema the cult of the emperor had made Roman religion at best a quaint or misguided belief to Christian America and at worst a sacrilegious antagonist to Christianity, films after 1945 could add a powerful new political side to this.

The fire of Rome as depicted on American screens also points to twentieth-century history. The "modernized production" of DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*, which was released in 1944, connects a specially added prologue sequence with the old 1932 footage of Rome burning. The prologue explains that "Nero thought he was master of the world. He cared no more for the lives of others than Hitler does."²⁰ As regards *Quo Vadis*, studio boss Louis B. Mayer wanted a "De Mille-like religious epic," whereas John Huston, who had originally been set to write and direct the film, aimed for "a modern treatment about Nero and his fanatical determination to eliminate the Christians in much the same manner as his historic counterpart and fellow madman, Adolf Hitler, tried to destroy the Jews two thousand years later."²¹ Mayer had Huston replaced as writer and director, and a team of screenwriters was instructed "to eliminate the political parallels and turn the movie into a virtual remake of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*" (Higham 1993: 389). Nevertheless it is surprising how much of Huston's perspective is retained in the finished film. A clear example of the Nero-Hitler analogy occurs immediately after the Fire-of-Rome sequence. Poppaea coaxes Nero to divert the people's suspicion of his own responsibility for the fire to the Christians. When Nero dictates a proclamation to the Roman people to this effect, Petronius tries to dissuade him. The dialogue in this scene, with Nero still wearing his eagle cloak, leaves no doubt that Nero is meant to be understood as a precursor of Hitler:

¹⁹ The following year *The Hitler Gang*, a film about Hitler's rise to power, was to contain a speech with this statement: "We need no God on a distant throne. Adolf Hitler is the Jesus Christ as well as the Holy Ghost of the Fatherland" (quoted from Koppes and Black 300, with spelling "Adolph"). On the insistence of the Production Code Administration these words had to be deleted as blasphemous, although they were an exact quotation. On the PCA see Koppes and Black 13–16.

²⁰ Quotation from Wyke 1994: 20; cf. Wyke 1994: 21 and Plate 2.

²¹ Both quotations from Huston 175. For detailed scholarship on the actual relations between Jews and Romans from the first century B.C. see Smallwood.

NERO: I hereby proclaim that the guilt of the burning of our beloved city rests with the foul sect which calls itself Christians. They have spread the lie that it was Nero who burned Rome. I will exterminate these criminals in a manner matching the enormity of their crime. Their punishment will be a warning, a spectacle of terror, to all evil men, everywhere, and forever, who would harm you or harm Rome or harm your emperor, who loves you.

PETRONIUS: Pause, Nero, before you sign this decree Condemn these Christians, and you make martyrs of them, ensure their immortality. Condemn *them*, and in the eyes of history you'll condemn yourself.

NERO: When I have finished with these Christians, Petronius, history will not be sure that they ever existed.

Unlike almost twenty years earlier, when DeMille's Nero had commanded, "The extermination of Christians must continue," in 1951 the words "exterminate" and "terror" must have struck many in the audience as an unambiguous reference to Nazi atrocities. Nero's last statement quoted here supports this view: it is a reminder of the holocaust.²² Later in the film, Nero's order after Petronius' suicide ("Burn his books!") may be an echo of Nazi behavior as well. (An instance of Nazis burning books is included in *Prelude to War*.)

Nazi-like viciousness finds a dramatic visual expression in the film's depiction of the death of St. Peter. Peter says to the centurion come to lead him to crucifixion: "To die as our Lord died is more than I deserve." The centurion's snide answer: "We can change that!" Now a cut, and director Mervyn LeRoy shows us Peter on the cross in a manner intended to shock. The camera slowly tilts up from the ground to reveal Peter crucified upside down, with a musical fortissimo on the soundtrack. This is one of the very few moments in almost three hours of screentime, and the most forceful one as well, to draw the viewers' notice to the film's cinematic technique. According to the principles of classic Hollywood filmmaking, audiences are rarely if ever to become conscious of the camera or of the editing; their attention is not to be diverted from the plot. Here the camera's unusual vertical movement departs from this standard to create a strong emotional reaction in the spectator. It is

²² McBride 497: "the Allies had learned of the extermination of the Jews as early as August 1942 and the existence of the death camps was widely known by 1943, when Capra's film *The Nazis Strike* showed a concentration camp and stated that Hitler's plan was to 'exterminate all those he considers "inferior races" '." For Hollywood's awareness of the precarious situation of Jews in Germany see Koppes and Black 27–30 on the 1939 film *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, especially their quotations of comments on the film from industry insiders at 28.

also noteworthy that in the Christian tradition St. Peter himself requests upside-down crucifixion, whereas in the film this is presented as a particularly choice example of Roman sadism.²³ It is meant to fulfill what Nero, ominously, had said about Peter a little earlier in the film: "Something singular must be done with him."

V. THE HOLOCAUST

A visually more explicit analogy to the Nazi holocaust than Nero's decree in *Quo Vadis* appeared on the screen ten years later at the beginning of Nicholas Ray's film about Jesus, *King of Kings* (1961). Its prologue employs ringing pseudo-biblical phrases, which the narrator, Orson Welles, delivers with great solemnity. Some of the images accompanying his words are the most chilling parallel to the holocaust in all of Hollywood's Roman cinema. Here are the relevant lines of the prologue; I omit an earlier part in which Pompey the Great had invaded and desecrated the temple of Jerusalem:

Thus, for more than fifty years after Pompey's invasion, the history of Judaea could be read by the light of burning towns. If gold was not the harvest, there was a richness of people to be gathered. The battalions of Caesar Augustus brought in the crop. Like sheep from their own green fields, the Jews went to the slaughter. They went from the stone quarries to build Rome's triumphal arches. But Caesar could find no Jew to press Rome's laws on this fallen land. So Caesar named one Herod the Great, an Arab of the Bedouin tribe, as the new false and maleficent King of the Jews.' But from the dust at Herod's feet, rebellions of Jews rose up, and Herod, in reply, planted evil seeds, from which forests of Roman crosses grew high on Jerusalem's hills. And Herod the Great, passing pleased, bade the forest multiply.

While hearing this, we see on the screen the light of burning towns torched by Romans and images of peaceful Jews being rounded up. With Herod, the Romans' puppet king and collaborator, we watch a long line of Jews walking to their crucifixion; they are carrying the horizontal beams of their crosses up a Jerusalem hill while Roman soldiers whip them along. Another line of people is being herded toward execution as well. The camera then pans left and down from the forest of crosses on the hill to reveal the most

²³ For Peter's request to be crucified upside down see Euseb. *Hist. Eccl.* 3.1.2. Eusebius claims Origen's *Comm. in Gen.* as his source for the deaths of Saints Peter and Paul under Nero. Cf. Perkins 138–140 and, for the wider context, Cullmann 71–157.

haunting images of the whole prologue. A man who has died on one of the crosses is tossed down the hill, where Roman soldiers pick him up by his hands and feet and throw him on a pyre on which a number of corpses are already being burned. This heap of corpses reminds us of similar occurrences in twentieth-century history. Image and text illustrate and complement each other. The pictures of such atrocities resulting from military occupation and especially the phrase "the Jews went to the slaughter" are meant to evoke memories of the fate of modern European Jews. The stone quarry which had been shown a little earlier in the prologue thus becomes a parallel to a Nazi labor camp. As director Ray remarked in 1975, describing his approach to the film: "If anyone goes in to see this film, at least they will not walk out being anti-Semitic" (quoted from Kreidl 190).

Altogether, then, the pagan Romans, running a totalitarian military empire, resemble the Nazis of the filmmakers' recent past, while ancient Jews and Christians take the place of modern Jews. The fact that in the films' plots most of the persecuted Christians are Roman citizens reinforces the obvious point that tyranny turns against its own people and causes their destruction. *Quo Vadis* explicitly states this by lifting Suetonius' report that Emperor Caligula wanted the Roman people to have only one neck—the more easily to be killed—and applying it to Nero.²⁴ "The world is mine, and mine to end," Nero will later say about his empire, a clear reference to Hitler's megalomania and recklessness in bringing war to the world and leading his own country to the brink of annihilation.

Both Christians and Jews are threatened with extinction, so there is not much difference in filmmakers' portrayals of them as victims of Rome. Most Jews in these films look like Christians anyway, since the major parts of ancient Jews tend to be assigned to non-Jewish (and presumably Christian) actors, from Jesus to Ben-Hur. But it is ironic that Jews and Christians should be practically indistinguishable from each other in this way not least because this circumstance accurately reflects, if wholly accidentally, the first-century A.D. Roman view of both religions. Added irony lies in the fact that Christianity, which these films extol, has a long history of antisemitism and persecution of Jews. This irony is particularly pronounced in the case of *Quo Vadis* if we consider its

²⁴ Sueton. *Calig.* 30.2. The saying has been given to Nero since at least the early seventeenth century; examples at Gwyn 439–440.

Jewish production staff: Louis B. Mayer was head of MGM, Jewish screenwriters rewrote the script after John Huston had been dismissed, Sam Zimbalist produced it, and Mervyn LeRoy directed it.²⁵ Despite its highly Christian content, and despite the Pope's blessing of the director's copy of the script (LeRoy and Kleiner 174), it is doubtful that Mayer, Zimbalist, LeRoy, or the screenwriters were particularly interested in promoting Christianity for its own sake. A few years later, William Wyler, director of the 1959 *Ben-Hur*, "used to joke that it took a Jew to make a really good movie about Christ" (quoted from Herman 400), and the same may be true of films about Christianity in general and *Quo Vadis* in particular. And most likely nobody involved in making *Quo Vadis* was aware of the irony of filming outside Rome at Cinecittà, the film studios which had been founded in the Mussolini era.

Quo Vadis remains a fascinating comment on its own time. Although the studio's publicity department had modestly noted that "MGM feel privileged to add something of permanent value to the cultural treasure house of mankind" (quoted from Halliwell 491), this treasure soon lost much of its attraction to the public, not least because it came a little too early to profit from the widescreen cinematography which more than anything else has conveyed epic grandeur since 1953.²⁶

VI. WILLIAM WYLER AND ANTIFASCISM

The popular Hollywood image of ancient Rome as evil empire was to receive its most powerful restatement after *Quo Vadis* with the biggest and most famous epic of them all, MGM's remake of its own 1924 *Ben-Hur*. Gore Vidal, who with British playwright Christopher Fry had been one of the two principal but uncredited screenwriters of the new version of *Ben-Hur*, has characterized the storyline of both novel and film with the acerbic and concise wit characteristic of him: "The plot of *Ben-Hur* is, basically, absurd and any attempt to make sense of it would destroy the story's awful integrity" (Vidal 1976; quoted from Vidal 1993: 1176). The accuracy of this verdict will be obvious to any viewer acquainted with Roman history on even the most superficial level. But the

²⁵ On Hollywood as a Jewish "empire" see the standard work by Gabler.

²⁶ Twentieth Century-Fox deliberately chose *The Robe*, a Romano-biblical subject based on a ten-year-old bestseller, for its first CinemaScope release, although the studio had started filming the widescreen comedy *How to Marry a Millionaire* before production began on *The Robe*.

novel, purest melodrama, cries out for visual adaptation. Not surprisingly, the three American film versions—the first appeared in 1907—have assured its survival as one of the most popular and influential re-creations of the Roman empire, much more so than the book or its nineteenth-century stage adaptations had been able to do. William Wyler, the director of the new *Ben-Hur*, had had no prior experience with ancient epic cinema except for his stint on the 1924 silent version, where he worked on the chariot-race sequence as one of the film's assistant directors (Herman 71–73 and 402). Vidal, who wrote most of the remake roughly up to the climactic race, reports that Wyler prepared himself for his mammoth production by studying earlier Roman films in order to get the right look for his (Vidal 1992: 84 and 1995: 303). It is a measure of Wyler's accomplished direction that he succeeds in making the "awful integrity" of the plot entirely credible. Rather than merely thrilling to a vast spectacle, audiences become deeply involved in the characters' actions even to the extent of swallowing all the historical silliness wholesale.

Because of their strong involvement in the fate of *Ben-Hur* and his family, spectators have tended altogether to miss the contemporary overtones in the film's visuals and in its dialogue. These modern aspects serve to de-emphasize the plot's awfulness and to provide it with much of the sorely needed integrity which enables the creaky story to stand up to the expectations of filmgoers in the late 1950's (and beyond). The film makes the Roman empire comparable to Nazi Germany and turns Messala, the heavy, into a particularly effective cinema villain. Much of the impact of Messala in Wyler's film derives from this new characterization of the story's antagonist.

The chief reason for the modern themes in the film is the presence of Wyler himself, an American immigrant of German-Jewish descent. Wyler, one of whose relatives had been imprisoned in the concentration camp of Dachau for nearly a month (Herman 131–132), took an active part in anti-Nazi efforts. "He was definitely a 'premature anti-Fascist,' as they called him back in the thirties," his wife once said.²⁷ Even before the U.S. entered World War II, Wyler had taken a strong anti-Nazi stance in favor of U.S. involvement and had expressed it in his film *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), which dealt with the German attack on Britain. Winston Churchill called this film "pro-

²⁷ Quoted from Herman 338. On Wyler's war service and his war documentaries (*The Memphis Belle*, *Thunderbolt*) see Herman 242–277.

paganda worth a hundred battleships" (quoted from Herman 235). Wyler had made a major change in the film's script in a scene involving a young German pilot shot down over England. In the screenplay from which he was working, this pilot had been a figure without a political or ideological side to him; Wyler's revision turned him into a spokesman for the master race.²⁸

The driving force of the plot of *Ben-Hur* is the moment when Judah Ben-Hur and Messala become deadly enemies. The quarrel which erupts between them has to propel the rest of the narrative for about three hours of screen time. For this scene to be able to carry such weight, Vidal slyly introduced a homosexual subtext into the relationship between Messala and Ben-Hur.²⁹ In addition, Wyler and Vidal updated the characterization of both with visual and verbal overtones of modern history, especially in a number of scenes crucial to the plot. Messala, who cannot understand Ben-Hur's suggestion—"Withdraw your legions"—which would lead to more peaceful relations between Romans and Jews, tells Ben-Hur prior to their quarrel about Roman rule in the East: "The emperor is displeased. He wishes Judaea to be made into a more obedient and disciplined province." Here we have standard Nazi talk about order and obedience. Messala continues in terms which need no further elucidation:

The emperor does not approve of your countrymen. There's rebellion in the wind. It will be crushed Be wise, Judah. It's a Roman world; if you want to live in it, you must become part of it It was fate that chose us to civilize the world, and we have Persuade your people that their resistance to Rome is stupid. It's worse than stupid—futile. For it can end in only one way, extinction for your people.

The ideology behind such words is clear enough; even Messala's mention of fate points to the Nazis' obsession with Providence as their justification and driving force.³⁰

²⁸ When Louis B. Mayer remonstrated with Wyler about this change, Wyler answered him: "Mr. Mayer, if I had several Germans in the picture, I wouldn't mind having one who was a decent young fellow. But I've only got one German. And if I make this picture, this one German is going to be a typical little Nazi son-of-a-bitch. He's not going to be a friendly little pilot but one of Goering's monsters" (quoted from Herman 232).

²⁹ Vidal 1976 (= 1993: 1176) and 1995: 303–306. He claims that his inspiration were conversations with Federico Fellini about *La Dolce Vita*, which Fellini was preparing at Cinecittà while *Ben-Hur* was shooting nearby (Vidal 1995: 304).

³⁰ In this there is a point of contact with the ancient Roman belief in *providentia*

Shortly after, Messala comes to visit Judah and his mother and sister at their home. He describes his recent experiences in the army, and his listeners, both on screen and in the theatre, immediately realize that he has become a brutal militarist. His casual summary of the Roman campaign in Libya reveals his utter lack of compassion: "then we marched on their capital—barbaric city, but fascinating—or was, till we destroyed it. Now it's nothing but ashes." Messala's clipped speech effectively underscores the Roman army's Nazi-like scorched-earth tactics, in which Messala readily participated.

A little later their quarrel begins when Messala wants Judah to reveal the names of Jews hostile to Roman rule in Judaea: "Who are they? Yes, Judah—who *are* they?" When Ben-Hur asks in return, "Would I retain your friendship if I became an informer?" the word "informer" not only points to collaboration with the enemy in war but is probably also a reference to HUAC, the Hollywood Ten, and McCarthyism.³¹ Messala then reveals his obsession with power and his ambition to rise to the top:

The emperor is watching us. At this moment he watches the East. This is my great opportunity, Judah, and yours, too. If I can bring order into Judaea, I can have any post I want, and you'll rise with me, I promise. And you know where it can end? Rome! Yes, perhaps at the side of Caesar himself—I mean it, I mean it! . . . The emperor is watching us, judging us; all I need do is serve him!

Judah immediately notices the quasi-religious fervor of Messala's excited words: "You speak of the emperor as if he were God." Messala's answer combines excitement and idealism with the will to power characteristic of Nazism: "He *is* god, the only god. He is power, real power on earth." Here Wyler and Vidal follow the Hollywood tradition of attributing divinity to the emperor, in this case

as a guiding power of their destiny and empire. On this important aspect of Roman history and culture see, e.g., Martin. It goes without saying that neither such a belief nor the modern scholarly debate over Roman "imperialism" turns the Romans into exemplars or precursors of twentieth-century fascists.

³¹ On Wyler's political activities and his involvement in the anti-HUAC Committee for the First Amendment see Herman 298–305. On Wyler's membership in The Republican and Democratic Joint Committee of Hollywood for the Preservation of Civil Liberties see Ford 226. John Huston also belonged to both these committees. Wyler was himself an intended target of HUAC (Herman 338). For a concise overview of Hollywood's entanglement with HUAC, the loyalty oath, and the blacklist see McBride 561–580, with several references to Wyler. On the topic in general cf. Navasky. As Ben-Hur tells his mother and sister about Messala after their quarrel: "He wanted me to betray our people."

Tiberius, although they wisely do not give this side of their perspective on Roman culture the emphasis it had earlier received in *Quo Vadis* or in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*.

The quarrel between Roman and Jew then reaches its climax with Messala's contemptuous outburst: "In the name of all the gods, Judah, what do the lives of a few Jews mean to you?" This is a question so direct and outspoken that its contemporary meaning points well beyond the context in which it appears. Messala has also referred once more to the order on which dictatorship depends. He will later inform the new governor of Judaea, before the latter's ceremonial entry into Jerusalem: "Jerusalem's welcome will not be a warm one. But I pledge my Lord that it will be a quiet one." We may compare the narrator's comment on the empty streets of Paris at Hitler's entry into the city in *Divide and Conquer*: "No cheering crowds here to welcome in the new order." Messala's words may also have reminded some people in the audience of Reinhard Heydrich, Himmler's right hand, as he was called, and the driving force behind much of the Nazi terror. As deputy *Reichsprotektor*, Heydrich had adopted a strategy such as Messala describes in Bohemia and Moravia.³² In a comparable vein Messala will later express his belief in terror as a political tool when he coolly informs Ben-Hur that he is sending him to the galleys: "By condemning without hesitation an old friend, I shall be feared."

In the quarrel scene, Messala's repeated mention of the emperor points to the centralized totalitarian system which Rome represents. The callousness in his casual reference to the deaths of a few Jews must have struck home at least to the Jewish part of the film's audience. Ben-Hur's answer ("If I cannot persuade them, that does not mean I would help you *murder* them!") only leads to Messala's next outburst, in which he urges Judah to submit to the closed system of Roman domination: "You are a conquered people. You live on dead dreams, you live on myths of the past . . . There is only one reality in the world today. Look to the West, Judah, don't be a fool—look to Rome!" This is a brief but effective summary of *Realpolitik* calling for survival through collaboration.

A parallel expression of totalitarian "order" was to be seen and heard the following year in *Spartacus*. In the middle of the night

³² Heydrich and the fate of Lidice had become familiar to American audiences in two 1943 films: *Hangmen Also Die* and *Hitler's Madman* (originally to be called *Hitler's Hangman*). The latter was filmed almost completely in the style of a documentary. Both films were directed by expatriate Germans (Fritz Lang, Douglas Sirk). Cf. Koppes and Black 296–297.

and in a darkened senate chamber Crassus reveals his incipient dictatorship to Gracchus, the old senate leader who represents the traditional virtues and wily politics which had made Rome great. Crassus threatens Gracchus' followers with death "if they falter one instant in loyalty to the new order of affairs." He then continues in obviously fascist language:

CRASSUS: The enemies of the state are known. Arrests are in progress; the prisons begin to fill. In every city and province, lists of the disloyal have been compiled. Tomorrow they will learn the cost of their terrible folly, their treason.

GRACCHUS: And where does my name appear on the list of disloyal enemies of the state?

CRASSUS: First.

Crassus then tries to induce Gracchus "to accept destiny and order," as he calls it, and to collaborate with him in return for his life. The figures of Messala and Crassus as they appeared to American audiences within two years are strikingly similar in conception.

VII. MESSALA, REPRESENTATIVE OF THE MASTER RACE

Judah's reply to Messala's encomium of Roman power in Wyler's *Ben-Hur* is the strongest indictment of imperial Rome in post-war Hollywood cinema: "Rome is evil . . . Rome is an affront to God. Rome is strangling my people and my country, the whole world, but not forever. I tell you, the day Rome falls there will be a shout of freedom such as the world has never heard before." The last sentence here quoted was included in the film's theatrical trailer, presumably because it was meant to provide a convenient summary of the plot and to point to the modern significance of the film's theme. A shout of freedom such as this had indeed been heard in May of 1945.

As is to be expected, in the quarrel scene the modern totalitarian overtones lie primarily in the dialogue. Wyler expresses the same perspective in both verbal and visual terms, with emphasis on the latter, when the Romans storm Ben-Hur's house and arrest him and his family after a loose roof tile accidentally strikes the Roman governor. Because of Wyler's consistent re-imagining of the plot in modern terms, this is one of the most accomplished sequences in the whole film. Roman soldiers batter against the entrance to the Hur mansion, and Judah, in the courtyard with his family, instructs the servants to open the gate. Aware of the precariousness of his own situation, he clearly believes that to co-operate with the enraged

Romans and to explain the accident makes better sense than to provoke them even more by resisting. It will come as a greater shock to him than to the viewers when appeasement and appeals to reason fall on deaf ears. Judah's order to let the Romans in takes up only a very brief moment, and in the general excitement audiences easily miss its importance. It is, in fact, an exact parallel to attempts on the part of modern Jews, faced with threats of Nazi aggression, not to make the situation worse by showing even the slightest resistance: 'If we reason with them as with civilized people, they will surely come to their senses. We even opened the door to them of our own accord! This will make them understand that we have nothing to hide and must be innocent.' But such thinking does not usually win out over irrationality, either in history or in this film. Judah's willingness to explain and co-operate only brings disaster on himself and his family. A Roman officer pays no heed to his words but simply commands, "Take him. Take all of them!" without showing the slightest interest in discovering guilt, innocence, or the truth. Roman soldiers now arrest everybody in sight—a clear parallel to indiscriminate Nazi reprisals.

When Messala enters shortly afterwards, his arrival is heralded to soldiers and film audiences alike in modern military fashion: a Roman shouts "Attention!" in such a way that the word's first syllable is barely audible. Messala implacably listens to Judah's explanation. Although Wyler makes it obvious that Messala believes Ben-Hur, the Roman does not save his former friend nor listen to the women's entreaties. (He only allows the servants to go.) The posture which Wyler has his Messala strike at this moment is telling: with his hands behind his back, his legs firmly on the ground and slightly apart, he represents the man in total control, a military bully unmoved by emotion and in thrall only to the ideology of dominance. It is, no doubt, an intentional pose patterned on modern examples. After the Hur mansion is deserted, Messala looks around the courtyard as if assessing the situation. Wyler now cuts from a medium close-up of him to a long shot which unmistakably shows that Messala has taken possession of all he surveys. The very silence of the moment reinforces to the audience the cruelty of the Romans' behavior which they have just witnessed.

One other scene in the film is significant for the subject under consideration. Before the climactic chariot race Sheik Ilderim, the owner of the horses Ben-Hur will drive, visits the Romans in the baths to induce them to bet on the outcome of the race. With flattery and pretended obsequiousness he manipulates them to bet such

large sums of money that Messala, at least, will be utterly ruined. Wyler and Vidal (or Fry) inject a particularly revealing moment into this otherwise not much more than functional scene. They emphasize the arrogance of those in power over the people they both rule and despise in such a way that the parallel to Nazism receives a significant twist. For an appropriate understanding of this moment, we must trace its permutations from the novel through the silent film of 1924 to Wyler's.

In all three, Messala's sense of superiority over non-Romans induces him to bet his entire fortune against Sheik Ilderim. In the novel Ilderim sends the wily Sanballat, his right-hand man, to raise the stakes. When Sanballat proposes six-to-one odds, Messala accepts with the reply: "Six to one—the difference between a Roman and a Jew" (Wallace 272). The silent film version preserves this sentence intact but in an intertitle gives it to Sanballat as a taunt to Messala's national pride before the bet is placed. In Wyler's film, Sheik Ilderim himself visits Messala and his friends and coaxes the Romans to bet at ever higher odds. When the Romans hesitate, Ilderim says to them: "Will no one back the noble tribune against a Jew, a galley slave?" Messala now rises to the bait: "Four to one, Sheik! The difference between a Roman and a Jew."—"Or an Arab!" one of Messala's friends immediately adds, looking at Ilderim.

The importance of this brief moment becomes evident not only through the additional words which had not appeared in either novel or silent film but, more importantly, from the way in which Wyler films and edits it. (The difference in the odds may be for the sake of greater verisimilitude, given the huge sums which are at stake.) In the novel and in the earlier film the Romans had been arrogant lords and masters, but their dominance had not carried overtones of contemporary politics or history as it does in Wyler's version.³³ Evidently, Wyler's Romans regard anybody who does not belong to their own country or race as inferior, and movie Romans have done so with predictable regularity. But Wyler goes beyond a mere restatement of this. The fact that he wants his audience to understand the dialogue just quoted as a reference to the recent past becomes clear immediately afterwards. With rapid cutting Wyler inserts a close-up of the face of one of Ilderim's attendants who, hearing the Roman's reference to Arabs, reacts to it with an angry look. The moment shows us that the Romans' arrogance and

³³ The 1924 film had, however, been banned in Italy because Mussolini took exception to a Jew's victory over a Roman (Brownlow 410).

cruelty toward Jews are not due to antisemitism; rather, it is their conviction that they are a master race which leads them to despise all others indiscriminately. To American audiences of the late 1950's, such an attitude must have evoked the Nazi ideology of Aryan superiority and its successful dissemination among the German people. (As the Petronius of *Quo Vadis* had commented on Nero's attempt to blame the fire on the Christians: "People will believe any lie if it is fantastic enough.") In Wyler's *Ben-Hur* an additional level of irony lies in the fact that these high and mighty Romans are too self-centered to see through the ruse of flattery and submissiveness with which Ilderim thoroughly bamboozles them. The sheik hides his true reaction to the Romans' insult behind a subdued chuckle, primarily so as not to endanger the betting. His revenge, of course, will be that, with the help of his horses and his charioteer, he leaves the great lords and masters of the world flat broke and, in the case of the most arrogant, dead.

VIII. GREATNESS AND TRAGEDY

Before the blood of Christ cleanses the world at the film's grand climax, Wyler recapitulates the theme of power and freedom in a disquisition on Roman statecraft, and on government in general, which Pontius Pilate delivers to Ben-Hur. Christopher Fry and Wyler now have Pilate give a more nuanced account of the nature of power than Messala had done in his earlier description of the world dominated by Rome: "Where there is greatness, great government or power, even great feeling or compassion, error also is great. We progress and mature by fault . . . Perfect freedom has no existence." But the filmmakers still turn the scales against Rome, as Pilate's immediately following words reveal: "A grown man knows the world he lives in, and, for the present, the world is Rome . . . There are too many small men of envy and ambition who try to disrupt the government of Rome . . . If you stay here, you'll find yourself a part of this tragedy." Ben-Hur's reply: "I'm already part of this tragedy."

This exchange is an effective summary of the moral aspects inherent in the religious and political conflicts and of the modern themes which the film addresses. Wyler's *Ben-Hur* thus goes well beyond the superficial portrayal of Rome in many American films. But even when their empire represents unadulterated evil, it is a measure of tribute to the Romans that they rather than any other people have become such prominent figures in American popular culture that their dramatic function as villains is immediately

apparent. Wyler and Vidal's Messala says to Ben-Hur early in the film: "Roman law, architecture, literature are the glory of the human race." This statement is true enough, but one would not know so from *Ben-Hur* or from most American films or popular fiction.

The only American film set in the age of imperial Rome to do justice to the greatness of Roman history and culture is *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Rather than setting up ancient Rome as the enemy of Christianity and as the antithesis of all that is good and decent in mankind, director Anthony Mann portrays Roman history on its own terms.³⁴ For instance, the triumphal sequence in this film shows us the overwhelming beauty of the Eternal City and demonstrates that the raised-arm salute need not look fascist if fascism is not the issue. The contrast to the triumph in *Quo Vadis* could not be stronger. Evidently, by the mid-1960's, Hollywood's equation of imperial Rome with Nazi Germany had run its course.

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³⁴ See my detailed discussion of this film at Winkler 1995. Bondanella 227 considers the dance of Commodus over a floor map of the Roman empire to be a historical allusion to Hitler's dance after the fall of France and a cinematic one to Adenoid Hynkel's dance with the globe in Charles Chaplin's Hitler parody *The Great Dictator* (1940). But the modern overtones in Mann's film express events and situations contemporary with its production. The fact that a close-up of Commodus' feet shows him treading on Italy and not on a conquered country speaks against Bondanella's view as well.

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