



PEPLUMANIA

Greco-Roman Antiquity in Film and On Television

International Conference

CSC-Cineteca Nazionale and AIRSC-Associazione italiana per le ricerche di storia del cinema

Roma, CSC-Cineteca Nazionale, January 21-22, 2027

CALL FOR PAPERS

The recent worldwide release of Christopher Nolan's *Odyssey* – one of the few *mainstream* directors today capable of sparking, for better or worse, passionate debate beyond the most dedicated *cinephile* circles – has had the merit of igniting a public debate on our relationship, as contemporary people, with the ancient world and its myths.

Since the dawn of cinema, in fact, Greco-Roman antiquity has always held an irresistible fascination for the art of the screen. This is hardly surprising: the possibility of 'reviving' monumental ruins and epic tales still offers, even today, a highly cinematic opportunity for staging.

Whilst the first cinematic *pepla* date back as far as the early 20th century, with shorts by e.g. Calmettes, Capellani and Feuillade in France, it was with the great Italian blockbusters of the 1910s that the genre established itself as a model for spectacular films and a driving economic force in the export of Italian cinema (Bertetto, Rondolino, eds., 1988; Alovio, Barbera, eds., 2014; Michelakis, Wyke, eds., 2023): the various versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Quo vadis?* (G.E. Guazzoni, 1913) and, above all, *Cabiria* (G. Pastrone, 1914) are high-budget films, imbued with literary and figurative references; yet, at the same time, they also serve as examples of how, more or less consciously, the genre lends itself to acting as an ideological mirror through which to transfigure the nationalist and colonial ambitions of the present (Bernardini, Martinelli, Tortora, 2005; Alovio, 2014).

From *Fabiola* (E. Guazzoni, 1918) to *Scipio Africano* (*Scipione l'africano*, C. Gallone, 1937), right up to *300* (Z. Snyder, 2007), the ancient world seems to provide a particularly suitable setting for the on-screen portrayal of the clash between different models of civilisation: republic and empire, the West and the 'East', the pagan world and nascent Christianity (Wyke, 1997; Giuman, Parodo, 2011; Venturini, 2015).

From the Golden Era of Hollywood, in particular DeMille's films *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Cleopatra* (1934) need to be remembered. In the post-war period, Hollywood was quick to capitalise on the monumental grandeur of 'sword-and-sandal' films to wage its battle against the rise of the small screen, waged through the use of Technicolor and widescreen cinematography. *Quo Vadis* (M. LeRoy, 1951), *Ulisse/Ulysses* (M. Camerini, 1954) and *Ben-Hur* (W. Wyler, 1959) also provided an opportunity to experiment with international production collaborations between American majors and Cinecittà, the new 'Hollywood on the Tiber' (Elley, 1984; Casadio, 2007; Della Casa, Viganò, eds., 2010). These were the years that also saw the successful emergence of a more camp and lower-budget version of the genre. Indeed, the 'muscular-mythological' cinema – which had already emerged in the silent era (Verdone, 1961; Farassino, Sanguineti, 1983; Dall'Asta, 1992; Reich, 2015; Rushing, 2016; Fair, Chapman, 2020) – in which imported American bodybuilders (Steve Reeves, Mark Forest, Gordon Scott) took centre stage as Hercules, Maciste and their successors, fighting for good in a fantastical world populated by European female beauties, monsters and wild beasts, and modelled in papier-mâché (Della Casa, Giusti, 2003).

Whilst, on the one hand, the *peplum* was a prolific genre of popular entertainment, on the other, the ancient world also held a fascination for the great masters of arthouse cinema. Among the directors who, despite having very different intentions and aesthetic approaches, ventured into the genre are, for example, Stanley Kubrick (*Spartacus*, 1960), Sergio Leone in his debut film (*Il colosso di Rodi/The Colossus of Rhodes*, 1961), Michael Cacoyannis (*Electra*, 1962; *The Trojan Women*, 1971; *Iphigenia*, 1977), Federico Fellini (*Satyricon*, 1969), Edgar Reitz (*Das goldene Ding/The Golden Thing*, 1972) and, above all, Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Edipo Re/Oedipus Rex*, 1967; *Medea*, 1969) (Frayling, 2012; Frayling, 2024; De Berti, Galletti, Slavazzi, 2009; Fusillo, 1996).

Echoes of Pasolini can also be found in the sophisticated serialised adaptations of *L'Odissea/The Odyssey* (1968) and *L'Eneide/The Aeneid* (1971), directed by Franco Rossi for Italian television – exemplary instances of the educational television model of that era. More recently, Greek mythology has captivated Franco Piavoli (*Nostos – Il ritorno*, 1989), Lars von Trier (*Medea*, 1988) and Straub and Huillet (*The Death of Empedocles*, 1986; *Antigone*, 1991). Before Nolan, *The Odyssey* was the unfinished film that the director-protagonist of Godard's *Le mépris/Contempt* (1963) wished to make, and the metaphor chosen by Kubrick and Theo Angelopoulos to title the wanderings of their heroes in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995).

Just as the Greek myth fascinates arthouse cinema, so too does Imperial Rome and its excesses serve as inspiration for films in search of 'sensational' stories. The 'dark legend' of Nero and Caligula, for example, lends itself well to the exaggerated portrayal of a morbid and violent eroticism (*Caligula*, T. Brass, 1979), whilst the complex political intrigues of the imperial court provide material particularly suited to the serialised narratives revived during the golden age of the early 21st century (*Rome*, 2005–2007; *Spartacus*, 2010–2013; *Domina*, 2021–2023).

With *Gladiator* (R. Scott, 2000) – which, not coincidentally, was released at the height of the digital revolution – the peplum genre experienced a commercial revival (Winkler, 2004). The extensive use of digital visual effects not only offered a new opportunity to recreate monumental sets and grand battles in star-studded blockbusters such as *Troy* (W. Petersen, 2004) but also made possible experiments in visual hybridisation with the aesthetics of the comic book in the aforementioned *300*, inspired by Frank Miller's artwork (Paul, 2013; Elliot, ed., 2015).

In recent decades, however, one of the main ways in which the cinematic world has appropriated the imagery of classical antiquity has been through its reinterpretation in the genres of fantasy and science fiction: reinterpretations of the Greek and Roman pantheon (the *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series, 2010–2013); the revival of the 'strong man' trope in sandals and dagger (*Conan the Barbarian*, J. Milius, 1982), often blended with Norse myths (the *Thor* series, 2011–2022); above all, experiments in dystopian science fiction that draw particularly effectively on the myth of the 'decline' of the Late Roman Empire (*Rollerball*, N. Jewison, 1975; *The Hunger Games*, G. Ross, 2012; *Megalopolis*, F. Ford Coppola, 2024).

In-depth and systematic studies have been devoted to the peplum genre; not the least, for example, the *Museum of Dreamworlds* research project, which focuses on the depiction of classical antiquity in silent cinema, the findings of which have recently been compiled on a website rich in in-depth material (<https://museumofdreamworlds.org>).

It is believed, however, that the vast array of approaches and research topics offered by such a prolific genre still leaves ample scope for further exploration.

We therefore invite scholars to submit unpublished papers exploring the relationship between the ancient Greco-Roman world and media productions, from the origins of cinema to the present day, preferably by combining 'textual' analysis with historical and documentary approaches.

By way of example (though not an exhaustive list), proposals may explore the following topics:

- Models of representation of antiquity: recurring *topoi*, clichés, narrative motifs.
- Literary sources and adaptations. From the Homeric epics to Shakespeare, from Edward Bulwer-Lytton to Robert Graves and Robert E. Howard (Michelakis, 2013; Wyke, 2020).
- Theatre and cinema: French classic theatre and film (Racine, Corneille; Campos et.al. 2021), British *toga plays* (Mayer, 1994; Richards, 2009).
- The cinema of antiquity as an ideological vehicle and a manifesto of identity: the past as a mirror of contemporary conflicts; the myth of the 'Third Rome' between nationalism and imperialism from the early 20th century to the present day. Representations of the 'other' between colonialism and Orientalist fascination.
- Intermedial relationships: pictorial and figurative references (Gailleurd, 2022; Blom, 2023; Winkler, 2024).

- Peplum cinema and comics, from *300* to the adaptations of the *Asterix* series (R. Goscinny and A. Uderzo) and *Alix/Alex* (J. Martin).
- An archaeological perspective: sources, interpretations, fidelity and distortions.
- The reconstruction of the ancient landscape: choice of locations, use of real monumental complexes, digital reconstruction.
- Costume.
- The relationship between ancient cinema, sport and physical culture.
- Production models (Di Chiara, 2016): the role of the first historical blockbusters in the emergence of the high-budget feature film; 1950s peplum films as a space for experimentation in international co-productions; serial productions.
- Reinterpretations of the Greco-Roman world through the lens of fantasy or science fiction.
- ‘Art-house’ ancient cinema. Examples of reinterpretation and stylistic approaches in the films of the masters.
- Parodies and camp reinterpretations, from *Tontolini Nerone* (F. Guillame, 1910) to *Maciste contro Ercole nella valle dei guai* (M. Mattoli, 1961) and *Life of Brian* (T. Jones, 1979).
- Paratexts: posters, stage photographs, novelisations, photo-novels.
- Gender issues: the representation of women in the ancient world (Wyke, 2022; Wozniak, Wyke, eds, 2026); queer, lesbianism and homosexuality (Günsberg, 2005; Renger, Solomon, eds, 2013; Theweleit, 2019).
- The peplum and the representation of eroticism, from arthouse cinema to genre comedies.
- Greco-Roman antiquity and animation: American productions (*The Roman Holidays*, Hanna-Barbera TV series, 1972; *Hercules*, Musker, Clements, 1997), free reinterpretations of Japanese anime (*Once Upon a Time... Pollon*, 1982–1984; *Arion*, Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, 1986) and Italian experiments (*Gladiatori di Roma*, I. Straffi, 2012).
- How audiovisual works from different cultures have reinterpreted Greco-Roman antiquity (*Sikandar*, Sohrab Modi, 1941; *Thermae Romae*, Hideki Takeuchi, 2012).

Proposals, approximately 300 words in length and accompanied by a brief professional biography (around 250 words), must be submitted **by 30 October 2026** to [**peplumania2027@gmail.com**](mailto:peplumania2027@gmail.com) and [**stella.dagna@unimi.it**](mailto:stella.dagna@unimi.it).

Proponents will receive a response by **November 10**.

The conference languages will be Italian and English.

Selective Bibliography

Alovisio, Silvio (2014), *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914). *Lo spettacolo della storia*, Sesto S. Giovanni (MI), Mimesis.

- Alovisio, Silvio; Barbera, Alberto (a cura di) (2014), *Cabiria & Cabiria*, Milan-Turin, Il Castoro-MNC.
- Aubert, Natasha (2009), *Un cinéma d'après l'antique: Du culte de l'Antiquité au nationalisme italien*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
- Bernardini, Aldo; Martinelli, Vittorio; Tortora, Matilde (2005), *Enrico Guazzoni. Regista pittore*, Cosenza, La mongolfiera.
- Bertetto, Paolo; Rondolino, Gianni (a cura di) (1988), *Cabiria e il suo tempo*, Milan, Il Castoro.
- Blom, Ivo (2023), *Quo vadis?, Cabiria and the 'Archaeologists': Early Italian Cinema's Appropriation of Art and Archaeology*, Turin, Kaplan.
- Cammarota, Domenico (1987), *Il cinema peplum*, Rome, Fanucci.
- Campos, René; Carou, Alain; Poldevin, Aurélien (2021), *De la scène à la pellicule - Théâtre, musique et cinéma autour de 1900*, Paris, L'Œil d'or.
- Casadio, Gianfranco (2007), *I mitici eroi: il cinema peplum nel cinema italiano dall'avvento del sonoro a oggi (1930-1993)*, Ravenna, Longo.
- Cherchi Usai, Paolo (1985), *Giovanni Pastrone*, Florence, La Nuova Italia.
- Dall'Asta, Monica (1992), *Un cinéma musclé Le surhomme dans le cinéma muet italien (1913-1926)*, Liège, Éditions Yellow Now.
- De Berti, Raffaele; Galletti, Elisabetta; Slavazzi, Fabrizio (a cura di) (2009), *Fellini Satyricon. L'immaginario dell'antico*, Clivio (VA), Monduzzi.
- Della Casa, Steve; Giusti, Marco (2013), *Il grande libro di Ercole. Il cinema mitologico in Italia*, Rome, CSC-Edizioni Sabinae.
- Della Casa, Steve; Viganò, Dario (a cura di) (2010), *Hollywood sul Tevere. Anatomia di un fenomeno*, Rome-Milan, CSC-Mondadori Electa.
- Di Chiara, Francesco (2016), *Peplum. Il cinema italiano alle prese con il mondo antico*, Rome, Donzelli, Roma.
- Dumont, Hervé (2009), *L'Antiquité au cinéma: Vérités, Légendes et Manipulations*, Paris, Nouveau Monde .
- Elley, Derek (1984), *The Epic Film: Myth and History*, London, Routledge.
- Elliot, Andrew (a cura di) (2015), *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
- Fair, John, David Chapman (2020), *Muscles in the Movies: Perfecting the Art of Illusion*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press.
- Frayling, Christopher (2000/2012), *Sergio Leone*, London, Faber & Faber.
- Frayling, Christopher (2024), *Sergio Leone by himself*, London, Reel Art Press.
- Fusillo, Massimo (1996), *La Grecia secondo Pasolini. Mito e cinema*, Florence, la Nuova Italia.
- Farassino, Alberto; Sanguineti, Tatti (a cura di) (1983), *Gli uomini forti*, Milan, Mazzotta.
- Gaillourd, Céline (a cura di) (2022), *L'oro di Atlantide: Il cinema muto italiano e le arti*, Turin: Kaplan.
- Giuman, Marco; Parodo, Ciro (a cura di) (2011), *L'altro Scipione. Scipione l'africano e il suo tempo. Iconografia dell'antico nel film di Carmine Gallone*, Rome, AV editore.
- Günsberg, Maggie (2005), *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hoberman, John (1988), *Politica e sport. Il corpo nelle ideologie politiche del Novecento*, Bologna, Il Mulino
- Mayer, David (1994), *Playing Out the Empire: Ben-Hur and Other Toga Plays and Films, 1883-1908*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

- Michelakis, Pantelis; Wyke, Maria (a cura di) (2023), *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Michelakis, Pantelis (2013), *Greek Tragedy on Screen*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Michelakis, Pantelis; Wyke, Maria (a cura di) (2017), *A Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen*, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell.
- Paul, Joanna (2013), *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Renger, Almut-Barbara; Solomon, Jon (a cura di) (2013), *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television. Gender and Politics*, Leiden-Boston, BRILL.
- Reich, Jacqueline (2015), *The Maciste films of Italian silent cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Richards, Jeffrey (2008), *Hollywood's Ancient Worlds*, London: Bloomsbury University Press.
- Richards, Jeffrey (2009), *The Ancient World on the Victorian and Edwardian Stage*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rushing, Rob (2016), *Descended from Hercules : biopolitics and the muscled male body on screen*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Solomon, Jon (2016), *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.
- Solomon, Jon (2001), *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, New Haven/ London, Yale University Press.
- Theodorakopoulos, Elena (2010), *Ancient Rome at the Cinema: Story and Spectacle in Hollywood and Rome*, Exeter, Bristol Phoenix Press.
- Theweleit, Klaus (2019), *Männerphantasien*, Berlin, Matthes & Seitz.
- Verdone, Mario (a cura di) (1961), *Il film atletico e acrobatico*, Turin, Istituto del Cinema.
- Venturini, Alfonso (2015), *La politica cinematografica del regime fascista*, Florence, Carocci.
- Wozniak, Monica; Wyke Maria (a cura di) (2020), *The Novel of Neronian Rome and Its Multimedial Transformation. Sienkiewicz's "Quo vadis"*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Wozniak, Monica; Wyke, Maria (a cura di) (2026), *Audio-Visual Roman Women. Gender, History and Screen Media*, London, Bloomsbury University Press.
- Wyke, Maria (1997), *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, London/New York, Routledge.
- Wyke, Maria (2002), *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Winkler, Martin (2004), *Gladiator: Film and History*, Hoboken N.J., Wiley-Blackwell.
- Winkler, Martin (2024), *Classical Antiquity and Cinema Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.