

## CHAPTER ONE

# A Critical Appreciation of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

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Martin M. Winkler

I believe in the nobility of the human spirit . . .

I don't believe in anything else.

– Anthony Mann (1964)

I miss the values of family, nobility, personal sacrifice and historical awareness that governed our films' heroes.

– Samuel Bronston (1988)

The preceding quotations characterize the approach to epic filmmaking by the director and the producer of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), but today their words are likely to strike us as old-fashioned or outdated. On our screens ancient Rome has usually been a sex-and-violence-driven imperialist society. Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) prepared the way for such portrayals of Rome in the big Hollywood epics made after World War II.<sup>1</sup> Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) deals with Roman history mainly as blood sport. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) plumbs the

<sup>1</sup> I have described the latter in "The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945," in Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; rpt. 2005), 50–76.

depths of supposedly authentic Roman torture and depravity and appeals equally to sadists and masochists. Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004), written by the author of *Gladiator*, tells more of a Roman than a medieval story but manages only a minimal plot line on which to hang a series of violent fights and duels in a depressingly dark world. Doug Lefler's *The Last Legion* (2007) is in the same vein. On television, the two seasons of *Rome* (2005, 2007) show us an unrelievedly dark world of political intrigue, assassination, and nearly endless sex. Most Romans, it seems, were sexual deviants engaged in militarism, conquest, slavery, and bloody games. And they were pagans, Christ crucifiers, and religious persecutors. How could they ever have survived as long as they did, much less have inspired most of Western civilization? If modern evil empires last only for a few decades, how could Rome have continued from 753 BC, the traditional date of its foundation, to AD 476, the end of the Western empire as a political entity, or even until 1453 if we include the history of the Eastern or Byzantine empire? "Our roads and our ships connect every corner of the earth. Roman law, architecture, literature are the glory of the human race," Messala says in William Wyler's version of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1959). This may be so, but we never see any of it. And it is the villain who voices these words, only to be told off by the hero: "I tell you, the day Rome falls there will be a shout of freedom such as the world has never heard before." Nor would we learn much about the greatness of Roman civilization from other films – except one.

## 1. "See the Greatness of Rome"

As its title indicates, the true subject of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is not a heroic individual's fight against an oppressor or corrupt system, although this aspect of epic storytelling is part of its plot, nor is it about conflicting religious systems. Instead, the film is a serious attempt to do justice to Roman civilization and to make a case for the continuing importance of Roman history.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The present chapter does not duplicate my briefer assessment in "Cinema and the Fall of Rome," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 125 (1995), 135–154. For other classical scholars' perspectives on *The Fall of the Roman Empire* see Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 185–188; Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 83–92; and Marcus Junkelmann, *Hollywood's Traum von Rom: "Gladiator" und die Tradition des Monumentalfilms* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2004), especially 177–193 and 337–

A brief look at how differently *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator*, its unofficial and unacknowledged remake, show us the city of Rome itself is instructive. Both contain scenes set in imperial palaces. Those in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are light and airy and attractive actually to live in. Those in *Gladiator* are dark and oppressive. The one building that defines Rome and its empire in *Gladiator* is the Colosseum, a place of violence and death.<sup>3</sup> The Colosseum is nowhere to be seen in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose chief setting is the Roman Forum. The Forum is nowhere to be seen in *Gladiator* except in a brief sequence that parallels a far more elaborate one in the earlier film. Commodus enters the city in a triumphal procession through the Forum. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* this had been the audience's first glimpse of Rome, meant to overwhelm by sheer visual appeal. Commodus' parade in *Gladiator* consists of six or seven chariots and looks puny, even if thousands of computer-generated soldiers and people fill the area. And the Colosseum ominously looms in the background. Since director Scott copied visual compositions taken from Leni Riefenstahl's infamous *Triumph of the Will* (1935), the effect is depressing and forbidding.<sup>4</sup> From the first, this Rome gives off an atmosphere of Albert Speer's design for Germania, the Nazis' megalomaniac new Berlin that was to rise after their Final Victory in World War II. The visual prominence and the dramatic function of the Colosseum and the Forum in their respective films tell us what we are to think of the people who ruled the world from this city. The Roman Forum was of such importance to the makers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* that they included an outline of its history in the film's American souvenir program (reprinted in this volume) which goes well beyond the normal bragging about size and cost of the set, which it also contains. Although it will not satisfy experts, this sketch provides readers – that is, the film's viewers – with a vivid impression of the importance of Rome and of the vicissitudes of “history's largest page,” as the Forum has been aptly called.<sup>5</sup>

346 (in comparison with *Gladiator*). See also the chapter by Bronston historian Jesús García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston* (Madrid: Ediciones del Imán, 2000), 229–251. Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 105 and 108–109, gives one of the earliest appreciations of the film.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my “*Gladiator* and the Colosseum: Ambiguities of Spectacle,” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 87–110.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur J. Pomeroy, “The Vision of a Fascist Rome in *Gladiator*,” in Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History*, 111–123, examines the similarities between *Triumph of the Will* and *Gladiator*.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase quoted is the title of the first chapter in William Vance, *America's Rome*, vol. 1: *Classical Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1–42.

The difference between *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator* is reinforced by the films' portrayals of their Roman emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. *Gladiator* focuses on Commodus, the villain who kills his father with his own hands. Marcus is dead and gone after about a quarter of the film's length (in its original release version). Even in this first part he is overshadowed by Commodus. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Marcus Aurelius is the central figure of the film's entire first half, the one dominant personality who determines how audiences are to respond to the world he rules. He appears in the very first scene. From *Gladiator* we would not know that Marcus Aurelius was an emperor decisively in command. Our first glimpse of him shows us a somewhat befuddled and worried-looking old man, who is passively watching from a distance what his general is accomplishing single-handedly against the barbarians. His later appearances only reinforce our impression of his ineffectual nature. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, although also elderly and in fragile health, Marcus makes difficult political and military decisions, addresses a large assembly of the empire's leaders, and holds his own against Commodus. This Commodus will in due course turn into a tyrant and, similarly to the Commodus of *Gladiator*, will undo what Marcus wanted to achieve once he has succeeded him to the throne, but during Marcus' lifetime he is no match for him. Others have to do the dirty work to put Commodus on the throne.

Nor would we know from *Gladiator* that Marcus Aurelius was a philosopher as well as an emperor. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, however, the Stoicism of the historical Marcus is represented by his *Meditations*, the personal reflections of Marcus Aurelius on life and death.<sup>6</sup> A poignant scene in which Marcus is holding a mental dialogue with Death reflects several of the individual meditations in his collection. The *Meditations* are defined as being identical with the spirit of Roman civilization. "Let not these be destroyed," says Marcus' daughter, Lucilla, "for *this* is Rome." (Cf. on this Chapter Nine.) The brief scene in which she utters these words is emphatically placed at the opening of the film's second half and indicates what the ending will confirm: with the death of Marcus Aurelius and of his spiritual and political vision for Rome, civilization is lost. The decline of the empire is shown in moral and not in military terms. Rome has reached what today we might call the tipping point: recovery or rescue are impossible; the fall is inevitable. *Gladiator* never mentions the *Meditations*.

<sup>6</sup> On the *Meditations* as self-revelation see P. A. Brunt, "Marcus Aurelius in His *Meditations*," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 64 (1974), 1–20.

The greatness of the historical Marcus Aurelius was celebrated in antiquity, and his reputation has survived until today. Modern verdicts, too numerous to be summarized or quoted here, have tended to emphasize his closeness to ourselves. Two examples may stand for many. To Matthew Arnold, writing in 1863, Marcus Aurelius “lived and acted in a state of society modern by its essential characteristics, in an epoch akin to our own.” He “thus becomes for us a man like ourselves.” This man Arnold characterizes as “perhaps the most beautiful figure in history” and “one of the best of men,” on the other hand as a “truly modern striver and thinker” and “a present source.”<sup>7</sup> Such he remains today. In 1994 Nobel Prize-winning poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky addressed Marcus Aurelius himself:

Ave, Caesar. How do you feel now, among barbarians? For we are barbarians to you, if only because we speak neither Greek nor Latin. We are also afraid of death far more than you ever were, and our herd instinct is stronger than the one for self-preservation . . . We sure feel that by dying we stand to lose far more than you ever had, empire or no empire . . . We are your true Parthians, Marcomanni, and Quadi, because nobody came in your stead, and we inhabit the earth. Some of us go even further, barging into your antiquity, supplying you with definitions.

About the *Meditations* Brodsky concludes: “if *Meditations* is antiquity, it is we who are the ruins.”<sup>8</sup>

In popular culture Marcus Aurelius can even be a future source, if only in disguise. In the original trilogy of his *Star Wars* films (1977–1983) George Lucas presents us with a wise teacher and warrior who bears an uncanny resemblance in appearance and function to the Roman emperor. Our first glimpse of Marcus in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* shows him wearing a cloak whose hood covers his head, the appropriate

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Marcus Aurelius,” in R. H. Super (ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. 3: *Lectures and Essays in Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 133–157; quotations at 140 and 136. Arnold’s essay first appeared in *The Victoria Magazine*, 2 (November, 1863), 1–19. Cf. also the brief remarks by Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, rev. ed. (1923; rpt. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972; several rpts.), 681–682. The emperor’s most recent fictional recreation is by Alan Stedall, *Marcus Aurelius: The Dialogues* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2005). Ancient voices on Marcus’ reputation are summarized by Anthony R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (1987; rpt. London: Routledge, 2000), 224–225 and 289 (notes).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “Homage to Marcus Aurelius,” in Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995; rpt. 1997), 267–298; quotations at 289–290 and 293.

way to conduct a sacrifice. Lucas's Obi-Wan Kenobi is usually dressed in a similar way. That both Marcus and Obi-Wan are played by the same actor only clinches the case.<sup>9</sup> O be one with Marcus, noble Jedi knight!

The portrayal of the philosophical emperor as an ideal human and dedicated statesman in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* adds a memorable instance to these and similar tributes, readily comprehensible even to those unacquainted with ancient philosophy or history. The similarity of actor Alec Guinness to Marcus Aurelius goes deeper than the nearly uncanny resemblance in facial features and hairstyle that is obvious to all who have seen ancient portraits or statues of Marcus. The film's emperor also speaks and acts in accordance with his ancient model. The most famous ancient work of art that depicts Marcus Aurelius is his equestrian statue on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. It combines expressions of majestic power and benign dignity. A modern author shows best, if somewhat romantically, what impression the statue makes on its viewer. In his 1860 novel *The Marble Faun* Nathaniel Hawthorne gives the following description:

The moonlight glistened upon traces of the gilding, which had once covered both rider and steed; these were almost gone; but the aspect of dignity was still perfect, clothing the figure as it were with an imperial robe of light. It is the most majestic representation of the kingly character that ever the world has seen. A sight of this old heathen Emperour is enough to create an evanescent sentiment of loyalty even in a democratic bosom; so august does he look, so fit to rule, so worthy of man's profoundest homage and obedience, so inevitably attractive of his love! He stretches forth his hand, with an air of grand beneficence and unlimited authority, as if uttering a decree from which no appeal was permissible, but in which the obedient subject would find his highest interests consulted; a command, that was in itself a benediction.<sup>10</sup>

Hawthorne's words are admirably sensitive to the aura of unlimited but in this case benign imperial power that is embodied in an emperor's mighty right hand, the *ingens dextra* mentioned in Roman literature.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For more details cf. my "Star Wars and the Roman Empire," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 272–290.

<sup>10</sup> The text of *The Marble Faun*; or, *The Romance of Monte Beni* is here quoted from Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Novels*, ed. Millicent Bell (New York: Viking / Library of America, 1983), 990–991. The description of Emperor Justinian's equestrian statue in the Augustaeum in Constantinople by the historian Procopius (*On Buildings* 1.2.10–12) indicates how closely Hawthorne captured the spirit of such statuary.

<sup>11</sup> The phrase occurs in Statius, *Silvae* 3.4.61. Cf. Martial, *Epigrams* 4.30.4–5, 4.8.10 (an *ingens manus*), and 6.1.5 (Caesar's *magnae manus*).

In 1909 Henry James was to refer to Hawthorne's description with approval. He quotes Hawthorne's impression about the commanding benediction of Marcus' hand and points to the "admirably human character of the figure."<sup>12</sup> A modern art historian similarly speaks of the emperor's "commanding gesture of benediction." He continues:

The sense of the gesture of Marcus Aurelius' right hand and, in consequence, the effect of the entire work would, indeed, be quite different were that gesture deprived of the universal meaning with which it greets and blesses its viewers.<sup>13</sup>

Another art historian calls this imperial posture the "gesture of power and benediction" and observes:

The supernatural redeeming power in the emperor's outstretched right hand presupposes higher powers and abilities dwelling in him. Through the emperor, manifesting his power in this gesture, divine interference in human affairs takes place.<sup>14</sup>

Viewers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, especially those familiar with the times and the thought of Marcus Aurelius, can immediately respond emotionally and intellectually to the ideal Rome the film shows us, first in its portrait of the emperor and what he stands for, then in the impressive set of the Forum, the visible symbol of this ideal and the decisive place of action in the film's second half.

The man who made it possible for us to be visually transported back to the Rome of Marcus Aurelius is Samuel Bronston, who spared no cost for this film.<sup>15</sup> Although he was a wily producer, all of his epic films

<sup>12</sup> Henry James, *Italian Hours* (1959; rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 141–142; quotation at 142.

<sup>13</sup> Phillip Fehl, "The Placement of the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Middle Ages," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 37 (1974), 362–367 and plates 80–82; quotations at 365 and 366. Claudio Parisi Presicce, *The Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius in Campidoglio*, ed. Anna Mura Sommella, tr. Andrew Ellis and Carol Rathman (Milan: Silvana, 1990), 89–108, gives an illustrated overview of the statue's history.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted from H. P. L'Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World* (1953; rpt. New Rochelle: Caratzas, 1982), 145 and 147.

<sup>15</sup> This could and sometimes did lead to (Roman-style?) excess and corruption. Cf. the experience film director Richard Fleischer describes in connection with a historical epic never made: "I went about my job of preparing the picture, trying to save money wherever I could. The resistance from everyone was considerable, even nasty. The art directors, [Veniero] Colasanti and [John] Moore, went into a positive snit when I restrained them from building large portions of sets I knew I'd never photograph. . . . Everyone was used



evinced an ulterior non-commercial involvement. Bronston was “an acute and generous businessman whose belief in quality spectacles led to the engagement of the finest talents [available] for each of his enterprises.”<sup>16</sup> Looking back on his career in 1988, he said:

I consider myself a twentieth-century artist whose medium consists of the most complicated elements: armies of talented people, huge financial capital, awesome communications technologies, and a collective of creative peers whose brilliance and discipline set a standard of quality that is still a global source of inspiration. Over the years my companies have worked to produce a sense of national and international pride through epic images of heroism, telling the most passionate of stories of all time: the Bible [in *King of Kings*], Spain’s mythology [in *El Cid*], Rome, Peking [in *55 Days at Peking*, about the Boxer Rebellion], the American Revolution [in *John Paul Jones*] . . . [Now] I miss the values of family, nobility, personal sacrifice and historical awareness that governed our films’ heroes . . . I miss seeing the kind of cinematic quality, the art and fineness that drove our work and characterized our films.

What Bronston says about internationalism is best exemplified in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Bronston’s production company was itself regularly called an empire, so we may adduce the words of a wise old senator in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* to characterize Bronston himself: “when its people no longer believe in it . . . then does an empire begin to die.” Bronston strongly believed in the themes of his epics. Even in regard to the near-Roman luxuriousness that he was famous for lavishing on visiting dignitaries and celebrities and on his stars and business associates, Bronston’s quasi-imperial terminology in the passage quoted is apt. There is even a close analogy to imperial Roman courts, for in Michael Waszynski, his associate producer, Bronston had a close and trusted confidant who, however, used his position to divert large amounts of money into his own pockets and to live in ostentatious luxury as Prince Michael of Poland.<sup>17</sup> Bronston himself felt a close affinity to the good emperor of his last epic:

to wallowing in unlimited funds. Economy and discipline were anathema.” Quoted from Richard Fleischer, *Just Tell Me When to Cry: A Memoir* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1993), 230. Moore and Colasanti had been the designers for *El Cid* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Large parts of the Roman Forum, built in three dimensions and furnished even on the inside, were never used for filming.

<sup>16</sup> Elley, *The Epic Film*, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Norma Barzman, *The Red and the Blacklist: The Intimate Memoir of a Hollywood Expatriate* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press / Nation Books, 2003), 306–307, 327–328, and 349–350, recounts a number of details about “the phony Polish prince” (355). Waszynski had previously directed films in Poland and Italy.



In retrospect, of all the characters in my films, I identify most with Sir Alec Guinness' portrayal of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius in his quest for *pax Romana*, for I have always been driven by the same hunger for world peace, world harmony, world friendship.<sup>18</sup>

Bronston's reputation has endured, as recollections of people who had worked with him show. One of his Spanish associates said: "Bronston had a special charm; he radiated a kind of light. He was accessible and very intelligent, though he lived in an ivory tower and was a dreamer."<sup>19</sup> Director Andrew Marton, who had collaborated with other directors on some of Bronston's epics in the early 1960s, was even more fulsome in his praise:

This American-financed "film industry" in Spain has one, and only one, person as its originator . . . Samuel Bronston was a really great producer. This man alone was responsible for [films] . . . made by a person who cared, who wanted to make important[,] big, elegant and sumptuous motion pictures and who didn't skimp. He was . . . the kind of person who doesn't want to turn his studio into a supermarket, although you can make money that way too.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> All of Bronston's words here quoted are taken from Mel Martin, *The Magnificent Showman: The Epic Films of Samuel Bronston* (Albany, Georgia: Bear Manor Media, 2007), 201–202 (spelling and punctuation slightly adjusted). Bronston made these statements when he received an award for *El Cid* from the Valladolid International Film Festival. García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston*, 333, quotes shorter excerpts in a Spanish version that is a little more passionate about Marcus Aurelius ("a man obsessed with the search for the *pax Romana*"). Sir Alec Guinness was eventually joined in peerage by Sir James Mason, Sir Christopher Plummer, and Sir Anthony Quayle, making *The Fall of the Roman Empire* the most aristocratic of films. Bronston contributed, if not exclusively for humanitarian reasons, to the survival of two blacklisted screenwriters, Ben Barzman and Bernard Gordon; cf. Bernard Gordon, *Hollywood Exile: Or How I Learned to Love the Blacklist* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 98–100 and 182–194, and Barzman, *The Red and the Blacklist*, 306–366. Barzman, 319, writes about Bronston: "Hardheaded and pragmatic . . . a cultivated, intelligent, widely traveled gentleman of the old school." And: "he had created a motion-picture fairy tale world with an opulence that rivaled and surpassed Hollywood at its height." Bronston was also adept at getting along with and even charming a modern absolute ruler, Spain's *Caudillo* ("Leader") Francisco Franco. On international filmmaking in Franco's Spain see now the overview by Neal Moses Rosendorf, "'Hollywood in Madrid': American Film Producers and the Franco Regime, 1950–1970," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 27 no. 1 (2007), 77–109.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted from Peter Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens: Spanish Cinema under Fascism and Democracy* (Denver: Arden Press, 1985), 66.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from Joanne D'Antonio (interviewer), *Andrew Marton* (Metuchen: Directors Guild of America / Scarecrow Press, 1991), 413.

*The Fall of the Roman Empire* acquired the reputation of having caused the fall of Samuel Bronston's production company and even the end of epic filmmaking altogether: "It is a convenient, though nonetheless true, fact that *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is synonymous with the Fall of the Historical Epic."<sup>21</sup> The film was too expensive – figures range from \$16 to \$20 million – to recuperate Bronston's investments. But such a claim, while not altogether groundless, is too sweeping. Bronston's arrangements with his American financier may have been a more decisive factor than has generally been allowed for. And the releases of George Stevens's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and Richard Lester's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* during the next two years tell us something different about the disappearance of antiquity from cinema screens. International epic filmmaking, if not on ancient topics, successfully continued with David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* (1965–1967, released in four feature-length parts and one of the biggest and most accomplished epics of them all), and the same director's *Waterloo* (1970). If any one film must be blamed for the demise of the ancient epic, it has to be Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963). But even here it was more the accumulation of run-away cost as precipitated by several false starts, infighting among highest-level executives, and general wastefulness that brought the studio to the brink of ruin than the actual expense, size, or quality of Mankiewicz's film.<sup>22</sup> So here, as in most other contexts, single-cause explanations blaming just one film tend to fall short of the mark.<sup>23</sup>

As had happened in Rome, Bronston's studio, too, was auctioned off, and in the very heart of his empire: on its sound stages. But this auction took a lot longer than the ancient one. As Spanish television reported:

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from Derek Elley, "The Fall of the Roman Empire," *Films and Filming*, 22 no. 5 (February, 1976), 18–24, at 18.

<sup>22</sup> On its qualities and fate see my "Cleopatra (1963)," *Amphora*, 1 no. 2 (2002), 13–14. And then came the epic debacle of Richard Fleischer's *Doctor Dolittle* (1967), featuring one of the stars of *Cleopatra*, and provoking further power plays behind the scenes. The account of its production in John Gregory Dunne, *The Studio* (1969; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1998), is required reading for anyone interested in the *hubris* (and *ate*, but not *katharsis*) of mid-to-late 1960s Hollywood. As Dunne was aware, it was difficult not to write satire. What had worked only two years earlier, when *The Sound of Music* was the studio's biggest success, was suddenly *passé*. Two other large misfires, *Star!* (1968) and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969), were also able to do little for Twentieth Century-Fox.

<sup>23</sup> For introductory summaries on the decline of epic films see Allen Barra, "The Incredible Shrinking Epic," *American Film*, 14 no. 5 (March, 1989), 40–43, 45, and 60, and Vivian Sobchack, "'Surge and Splendor': A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," *Representations*, 29 (Winter, 1990), 24–49, at 40–43.

“his gigantic cinema empire has crumbled . . . With over five hundred lots, in seven days, the auction has ended and, with it, a whole era of film history and splendor.”<sup>24</sup> The fall of Bronston’s empire inspired historian Will Durant, the celebrity consultant on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, to a melancholic outburst in Shakespearean eloquence:

Alas, what a fall there was, my countrymen! I had expected the critics to question the historicity of the film, and had steeled myself to being blamed; instead they condemned the picture on artistic grounds – too overwhelming a display of temples, spectacles, and battles; “spectaculars” had become too common, had lost their lure; and the enormous debt that the producer had incurred – partly through generosity to his employees – left his vast organization bankrupt. We [Durant and his wife Ariel] had not had much contact with Samuel Bronston, but we had come to like him, and we mourned his fate.<sup>25</sup>

Marcus Aurelius exhorts his empire’s leaders: “Look about you . . . and see the greatness of Rome.” This is Bronston’s perspective as well: *Look at my epic and see the greatness of Rome!* And it is the perspective of Anthony Mann, the film’s director. If we respond to the words and images on the screen, we can know what Rome at its greatest was like, what sometimes it could have been, and what all too often in history it fell short of being. The ending of the film is of particular significance in this regard.

## 2. The Ending

If this film’s content and style are unusual, its ending is unique. The standard endings of Hollywood’s Roman epics show us a tyrant’s overthrow, which signals the beginning of a better society. This works especially well in connection with religious themes, which point to spiritual regeneration after political and moral degeneration. The ending of Mervyn LeRoy’s *Quo Vadis* (1951) is one of the best-known examples. Marcus Vinicius, its hero, and his friend muse about the fate of empires from Babylon to Rome after the death of Nero. The friend voices his hope for “a more permanent world . . . or a more permanent faith.” Marcus

<sup>24</sup> Quoted, in my translation, from García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston*, 362. On the auction see also Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens*, 66. Further details concerning the end of Bronston’s company are available in a documentary-plus-interview short included on the 2008 DVD edition of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 357.

answers: "One is not possible without the other." The final scene gives us heavenly choirs singing *Quo vadis, domine?* Good General Galba, the new emperor-to-be, will give Rome stability and justice, regardless of his own overthrow and the eruption of civil war that were soon to follow in history if not in *Quo Vadis*. In Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953), which saw the ascent to power of Caligula, the hero and his beloved are condemned to death, but they walk straight up to heaven. This happens by means of a special effect that changes the background scenery from the emperor's palace to God's kingdom, again with heavenly choirs singing their hearts out: "Hallelujah!" In the sequel, Delmer Daves's *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), the screaming madman Caligula is silenced for good and for the good of Rome, to which a mild and decent Emperor Claudius will restore order. His wife Messalina, one of the most notorious femmes fatales in ancient history, sees the error of her adulterous ways and publicly pledges to be a faithful wife and a model empress from now on. Even when the hero is powerless against an evil emperor's or general's earthly might and dies for his cause, nothing is lost, for his is a timeless spiritual victory. In DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* hero and heroine die together in the maws of the lions in Nero's arena, but the gigantic cross of light, formed when the gate of the dungeon closes behind them, symbolizes their victory. (And the heavenly choirs? Of course.) Also obvious are the endings of Wyler's *Ben-Hur* and Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), two of the most famous Roman epics made not long before *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. In the latter *Spartacus* unhistorically but to good dramatic effect dies on the cross for the sins of the Roman world. His wife and son survive; the baby represents the hope for a better future and the eventual end of slavery. *Ben-Hur* vanquishes the evil Roman Messala in a chariot-race duel but can do nothing about the tyranny of Rome. (Cf. below.) Nevertheless, at the film's end Jesus, dying on the cross, washes away the sins of the world and by a miracle restores *Ben-Hur* to his mother, sister, and sweetheart. Heavenly choirs duly reappear on the soundtrack for the fade-out. *Ben-Hur*'s inventor, however, had gone even further than the filmmakers, for in the final paragraph of his novel General Lew Wallace attributed the survival of Christianity during Nero's persecutions and by implication its very existence to his fictional hero. So much for the temporal power of the Caesars. All's well that ends well or reasonably well.

Decades later, the ending of *Gladiator* still conforms to this basic pattern. General Maximus kills Commodus in the duel that such plots invariably lead up to. But, treacherously stabbed in advance by cowardly Commodus, Maximus himself dies. In death he is reunited with his mur-

dered family whom he sees waiting for him in a final vision. Like the hero and heroine of *The Robe* and even more than Spartacus, Maximus is granted a kind of romantic happy ending, made bittersweet because he also leaves behind a woman who once had loved him and still does, Marcus Aurelius' daughter Lucilla. But even at death's door Maximus saves Rome. He commands to free Gracchus, the senator who will form or head the new senatorial government that Marcus Aurelius had intended for Rome to end the rule of the Caesars.<sup>26</sup> Maximus' last public pronouncement is: "There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized. These are the wishes of Marcus Aurelius." Lucilla pays homage to him as he is being carried out of the arena – "He was a soldier of Rome. Honor him" – and confirms his crucial role in carrying out the regeneration of the empire: "Is Rome worth one good man's life? We believed it once. Make us believe it again." Her words are not addressed to anyone in particular, but all in the audience will readily apply them to the film's view of Rome. Yes, we believe it again. History was not like this noble and sentimental ending. There is hope for the future, as the film's final words, spoken by Maximus' friend and fellow gladiator Juba, tell us: "Now we are free" – as individuals, from slavery; as citizens, from tyranny. Here is a new birth of freedom. The last view of Rome before the fade-out confirms all this. In a panoramic long shot of the city the sun is breaking through the clouds. It is morning in Rome again. And the requisite choirs are swelling up, too, although in this case they are not heavenly but contemporary New Age ones. To quote Lucilla's earlier words from a different context: "This is a pleasant fiction, isn't it?" It is.

In this kind of ending tyranny and corruption are shown to be inherent in individuals, not in society as a whole. Once the villains are removed, things will improve, without any necessity for radical changes in the structures of government or society. The optimism on view in the cinema of Frank Capra may be the best representative of such populism: *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941). The John Does, champions of losing or lost causes – the latter the only ones worth fighting for, as we hear in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* – still have a chance against big shots and political machines because theirs is a great society. It's a wonderful life after all. This kind of perspective also conforms to the long-standing American tradition that deals with defeat or death by turning it into a higher victory. A

<sup>26</sup> On the historical and film-historical aspects of this cf. my comments in "Gladiator and the Colosseum," 108–109, with references.

classic example is the ending of Raoul Walsh's epic Western about General Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn, *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). As in history, the main character is defeated and killed with his entire contingent, but his death proves his moral integrity. By dying for at least some of the country's sins, Custer posthumously ends the influence of unscrupulous politicians and businessmen over the federal government. He was a soldier of America, and the film, if not history, honors him. General Sheridan expressly says so to Custer's widow at the end, but his words are meant even more for us in the theater: "Your soldier has won his last fight." This, too, is a pleasant fiction, made palatable because it comes at the end of a mythicized heroic and romantic epic. Custer makes us believe it again.<sup>27</sup>

In stark contrast is the ending of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. It, too, has the showdown between hero (Livius, the model for Maximus) and villain (Commodus). Commodus is killed, but Livius survives with Lucilla, his beloved. In standard cinema he would now assume the throne that is offered him, prove himself to be as good and just an emperor as we know him to have been a general, and save Rome from itself. None of this happens. Rome's decline and fall are unavoidable. Commodus has made sure of this with his dying command to burn the captive Germans, who curse Rome ("Wotan, avenge us!") and so foreshadow the eventual conquest of Italy and the Western empire by Germanic tribes. The Roman Empire will not be regenerated; the empire is up for auction. The structure cannot be repaired. Hamlet's stark verdict on the state of Denmark is fully applicable here: "rank corruption, mining all within / Infects unseen" – except that in this Rome corruption already *has* infected all within.<sup>28</sup> The rank corruption remains unseen by the people, who are engaged in empty celebrations as their society begins to collapse. The carnival-like atmosphere of song and dance that Anthony Mann shows us is anachronistic in its iconography – oversize masks worn by men on stilts – but eerily expressive. Without knowing it, the people are dancing on a volcano.

Livius does not speak of any dream that was Rome or of any improvement for the future. He rejects not only the imperial purple but all of Rome, walking off with Lucilla into what we may assume will be a private exile, away from all. The film's ending is presented to us as the irrevocable end. We hardly need the narrator telling us that what we have been watching for the last three hours was an example of a country

<sup>27</sup> I examine Walsh's film in "Homeric *kleos* and the Western Film," *Syllecta Classica*, 7 (1996), 43–54, at 45–48.

<sup>28</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.4.150–151.

on a course of blind self-destruction, the initial stage of a process to last for three centuries. Not even Livius can make us believe again. By the time we see and hear the last of the auction, he and Lucilla have already walked out of the frame as if they had never mattered. A new sunrise in *Gladiator* promises a new Rome; the sunny sky in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is blackened by the billowing clouds that waft over the Forum from the burning pyres of Germans and Roman senators who had opposed Commodus. There will be no new Rome.

Most extraordinary about the climactic duel between Commodus and Livius, however, is its pointlessness, to which Mann takes care to draw our attention. The duel is an accomplished action sequence (cf. below), but its thematic significance is even greater. As the duel approaches its climax, Mann cuts away to two of the observers in the Forum, an army commander who had been an ally of Livius but has recently succumbed to corruption, and one of Commodus' craven followers. The latter now turns to the commander: "Victorinus, no matter which one comes out alive, *you* have the power now. You have the army. Make me Caesar, and I'll give you one million dinars [i.e. *denarii*] in gold – one million 500,000 dinars." Victorinus ignores him and after Commodus' death quickly proclaims Livius Caesar to the people. The rabble, fickle as ever, shouts its assent. But Victorinus is just as fickle and quick to change sides again. After first betraying Livius he now urges him: "You're in command now, Livius. Rome is ours. Take the throne. Be Caesar." Victorinus evidently expects a large share of power and wealth from the new emperor. One of Commodus' other henchmen also shows his true colors, cutting his conscience to fit the cloth of the winning side: "Gaius Metellus Livius, the people are asking for you." The formality of his address reveals his sycophancy.

"No matter which one comes out alive" – these words carry an astonishing revelation: the very action that the whole plot has been moving towards and that in standard heroic stories provides the emotional payoff to their audiences turns out to be pointless. The "good guy" has at last defeated the "bad guy" and resolved the plot, but to no avail. Maximus both wins and dies in his duel with Commodus, but he is aware that he has accomplished something valuable and lasting for Rome, something that also serves to impart to the film's spectators a satisfying sense of poetic justice. Crime does not pay; villains bite the dust. Livius wins his duel as we expect him to do, but we do not expect him to end up roundly defeated in every other respect. The final words in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (1969), one of the most powerful adaptations of Greek tragedy, will come to the minds of viewers devoted to portrayals of classical sub-



jects on film: “Nothing is possible anymore,” says Medea. Not even the hero’s last feat can change anything. Livius has been a soldier of Rome, the greatest of all, but nobody honors him. No one, certainly not Livius, considers the throne an honor. This Rome is not worth one good man’s life. Livius believed it once. But he cannot make himself believe it again. Or anyone else. The old senator’s diagnosis was correct: “when its people no longer believe in it . . . then does an empire begin to die.”

The beauty and greatness of Rome, evinced visually by the film’s architecture and thematically by Marcus Aurelius, the humane philosopher-emperor, by the philosopher Timonides, and by the old senator who had urged change and reform – all this is gone. The auction of the empire, one of the most degrading episodes in Roman history, proceeds (although it did not occur on the death of Commodus). This Rome is a lost cause no longer worth fighting for. Viewers understand what Edward Gibbon had made evident in the monumental work that inspired this film, that the decline and fall of Rome was something that affected all of mankind and still affects us today. (Cf. on this Chapter Eight.) *The Fall of the Roman Empire* communicates to attentive audiences Gibbon’s melancholia over the loss of culture and civilization and a descent into new tyranny, wars, and barbarism. The film’s mournful music over the final credits – THE END in a dual sense – reinforces the mood the film leaves us with.

### 3. Musical Score and Plot: Private and Public

Dimitri Tiomkin’s score exemplifies what a film scholar has observed about the scores of historical epics: “The Hollywood epic also defines History as occurring to music – pervasive symphonic music underscoring every moment by overscoring it.”<sup>29</sup> The score of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* distracts from the film’s overall quality. A case in point is the first spectacular sequence in which we see the splendor and greatness of Rome, Commodus’ triumphal entry into the city. First-time viewers may be so overwhelmed by what they are watching on the screen as to pay scant attention to what they are hearing. For repeat viewers the images will retain their attraction, but the music accompanying them is likely to grow obtrusive or irritating. Tiomkin was well within his creative rights when he decided to “dismiss all idea[s] of giving this picture quasi

<sup>29</sup> Sobchack, “‘Surge and Splendor’” 25. There are exceptions. The scores composed by Miklós Rózsa for Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* and for *El Cid* are exemplary.

documentary-style music" and to "react spontaneously to the dramatic element which I gradually began to see and appreciate" in the film. "I . . . found myself . . . , to my great surprise, involved with . . . characters whose problems were remarkably like our own and practically coincidental with all human drama."<sup>30</sup> These words may explain both the appeal of the film's subject to Tiomkin and the excesses of his score.

There is, however, one important exception, the main theme. It serves a dual function, representing what we might call the film's public subject as expressed in its title and plot and the private theme of the romance between Livius and Lucilla. The main theme recurs frequently in the course of the film and is most often associated with the emotions and fate of the lovers. A simple and easily remembered phrase, the theme "has an eloquence and sweep wholly appropriate to the large-scale setting" and movingly expresses, at different moments, "the overall theme of decline." It is the first musical phrase we hear after the overture (which is frequently omitted from screenings) and during the opening credit sequence. It rises in an epic crescendo under the film's title card. Since we do not yet know anything about the story that is to follow, we identify the theme with Rome. But "its apparent romantic associations" make it equally suitable for the love theme. As a result we are nudged emotionally to respond to romance and history in equal measure. But the theme warns us from the very beginning that we are about to witness an unusual story, for it conveys "a funereal ambience for the empire."<sup>31</sup> The music tells us the meaning of the film's story: "the essential theme of failure that colors *The Fall of the Roman Empire*."<sup>32</sup> Tiomkin's theme sounds a dirge for the loss of Rome. So does the whole film.

The payoff comes at the end. After the narrator's closing words tell us about a civilization destroying itself as the auction of the empire is in full swing, the musical theme majestically and in stately measures rises on the soundtrack for the last time. Now it accompanies our last view of the Forum and of a sky obscured by smoke, then continues over a drawing

<sup>30</sup> The quotations are taken from "A Letter to Listeners," Tiomkin's text for the soundtrack album of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Tiomkin reports that he composed about two and a half hours worth of music. The album also states that he conducted an orchestra of 110 musicians. On his score cf. William Darby and Jack Du Bois, *American Film Music: Major Composers, Techniques, Trends, 1915–1990* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1990), 257–263. On musical scores for films set in antiquity cf. the overview by Jon Solomon, "The Sounds of Cinematic Antiquity," in Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, 319–337.

<sup>31</sup> Darby and Du Bois, *American Film Music*, 263 and 258.

<sup>32</sup> The preceding three quotations are from Darby and Du Bois, *American Film Music*, 261, 257, and 262.

of ruins surrounding the words THE END. (Cf. my discussion in Chapter Eight.) The fall of Rome has barely begun, but the loss is already being conceived as complete. And this ending may have made contemporary audiences think and feel about their own moment in history. Even if the West had recovered from the barbarities of two world wars, the early 1960s was still a time of precariousness and anxiety over the Cold War and a nuclear arms race, soon to be followed by student unrest, Vietnam, Watergate, and much beyond.<sup>33</sup> For viewers attuned to the emotional pull of romance and melodrama, here coupled to their sense of spectacular visual beauty and historical understanding, the effect can be overwhelming. In such emotional involvement may actually lie the ultimate cause for the film's financial failure at the box office far more than in the public's often postulated satiety with "sword and sandal movies." Those who had gone to see *The Fall of the Roman Empire* in the expectation of watching another uplifting story had their expectations thwarted and may have warned others off this film: No happy ending!

The film's end title closes what had begun with the title card, whose thematic importance is commonly overlooked. Side by side with male and female figures drawn in the style of ancient graffiti we can read two Latin phrases on either side of the screen. On the lower right, also in graffiti-style, is VOX POPULI and under it, in smaller letters, VOX DEI: "The voice of the people is the voice of God." Although it is a proverbial Christian saying, it fits the film's pagan context.<sup>34</sup> The saying is by Peter of Blois, the twelfth-century poet, diplomat, and Latin secretary to King Henry II, to Eleanor of Aquitaine, and to several archbishops of Canterbury. It was addressed to the clergy and exhorted them to heed their congregations' judgment of them. Its roots are ancient, both biblical and pagan.<sup>35</sup> In the film it contrasts with the people's obliviousness to Commodus' ruinous policies, just as it emphasizes his disregard of the people. In the film's first half the voice of Marcus Aurelius had addressed the empire's leaders but had really expressed his concerns for the people: VOX MARCI, VOX

<sup>33</sup> On this cf. Bernard Wasserstein, *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> This, too, sets the film apart from other epics. As Mann said in his essay: "Those films gave the impression that the Christian movement was the only thing the Roman Empire was about, but it was a minor incident in the greatness of the Roman Empire." Still, Christianity does briefly appear. The title card shows a fish in the familiar style ancient and modern Christians use as their symbol. Timonides will eventually convert; he wears a *chirho* pendant when Livius and Lucilla find his dead body. Tiomkin introduces the film's main theme with a solo organ, an instrument chiefly associated with church music.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Isaiah 66.6 (Latin version); Seneca the Elder, *Controversies* 1.1.10 ("Believe me, the people's tongue is sacred"; my translation); Hesiod, *Works and Days* 763–764.

POPVLI, we might say. More important, however, is what we read on the title card's center left: PAX ROMANA above the head of an emperor drawn in a manner copied from third- or fourth-century Roman artists. The two words are also written like graffiti. But they have been crossed out with a sweeping white line. (Chalk may be implied.) The whole thrust of the film is hereby announced visually, the ideal – the Roman peace – and its destruction. Rarely do epic films open so subtly.<sup>36</sup>

The public and the private, the personal and the political, the detail and the panorama – all these encompass the range of historical fiction in image and text and of historical scholarship. Tiomkin's theme and the entire film illustrate this conjunction of micro and macro history, as cultural and film historian Siegfried Kracauer calls it. What Kracauer says about the affinities between historiography and cinema is worth our attention. He observes:

discerning historians aspiring to history in its fullness favor an interpenetration of macro and micro history . . . [Historian Herbert] Butterfield . . . believes that the ideal kind of history would perhaps be "structure and narrative combined," – a history which is both, "a story and a study."

This is in striking analogy with film: the big must be looked at from different distances to be understood; its analysis and interpretation involve a constant movement between the levels of generality . . . [In cinema] the big can be adequately rendered only by a permanent movement from the whole to some detail, then back to the whole, etc. The same holds true for history . . . In consequence, the historian must be in a position freely to move between the macro and micro dimensions.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Or continue that way. In the film's second half Timonides, come to Rome together with some of the now peaceful Germans, is addressing the Roman people outside the city gate: "What we have done here could be done the whole world over." As he is speaking, a kind of shrine or small temple screen left is displaying a three-line inscription: INVENI PORTVM / SPES ET FORTVNA / VALETE. This is part of the Latin equivalent, existing in different translations, of an epigram in the *Greek Anthology* (*Anthologia Palatina* 9.49). In his *Anatomy of Melancholy* Robert Burton translates: "Mine haven's found, fortune and hope adieu. / Mock others now, for I have done with you." He falsely attributes the Latin to Prudentius. The motto also appears in Casanova's *Memoirs*, Lesage's *Gil Blas*, on the tomb of the sixteenth-century Florentine Francesco Pucci in Rome (the source for Moore and Colasanti?), and in several other contexts.

<sup>37</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 121–122 (in chapter entitled "The Structure of the Historical Universe"). His quotations are from Herbert Butterfield, *George III and the Historians*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 205. Kracauer, *History*, 122, quotes a vivid example of how to combine micro and macro from Russian filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin about a political demonstration. See further Kracauer, *History*, 181–182.

*The Fall of the Roman Empire* combines the public – characters from history – with the private – invented characters interacting with historical figures. So it is not a work of history. It combines fact and fiction to create a feeling of history by adhering to what have been the main characteristics of historical fiction since the novels of Sir Walter Scott. A modern scholar has listed the main features of Scott's historical novels according to the following categories:

*Subject matter*: "Scott normally represented an earlier stage of society as divided against itself, with that past conflict itself typically defined as a struggle between older and newer centers of power, and usually leading to a social resolution, but often at great human cost."

*Documentation*: Providing extensive source references, "Scott . . . offered his novels as a record of former manners and struggles."

*Manners*: "His prefaces stress that the great challenge facing the historical novelist is to make past manners live for modern readers without either leaving them unintelligible for the sake of fidelity or creating anachronism for the sake of making them intelligible."

*Plot*: Scott "would set a local or domestic action, in which the intimate manners of the culture could be displayed, against the background of a larger historical development. This arrangement allows for . . . the strictly factual and the more broadly typical historical representations . . . as well as between official or public or political history, on the one hand, and unofficial or private or popular history on the other."

*Characterization*: "Virtually all of his novels are populated with actual historical personages . . . However . . . these kinds of figures are not the protagonists of the historical novel . . . the protagonist at center stage is a relatively mediocre character who is caught between . . . two factions whose conflict . . . defines his character."<sup>38</sup>

With the partial exception of the second item, Scott's procedure is exemplified in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and in *Gladiator*, its epigone. As the scholar just quoted reminds us: "The French once developed a term for license-taking in historical representation that is a very close equivalent to what we mean when we speak of history gone Hollywood: they called it *histoire Walter Scottée*" – Scottified history.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> James Chandler, "Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today," in Gene W. Ruoff (ed.), *The Romantics and Us: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 237–273; quotations at 244–245.

<sup>39</sup> Chandler, "Scott, Griffith, and Film Epic Today," 268. I return to this valuable study and to Scott in Chapter Nine.

In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Livius' failure to counteract the failure of Marcus Aurelius, who did not soon enough ensure the succession of a suitable emperor, means the failure of Rome. The failure of Rome is the failure of civilization. The failure of the film at the box office is, however, not a sign of its artistic failure. As mentioned, a story of loss and defeat that stands apart from more common stories either of victory over evil empires and tyrants or of moral or spiritual vindication cannot have been appealing to the masses. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was no *Quo Vadis* and no *Ben-Hur*. It was not meant to be. As director Mann explicitly put it: "I did not want to make another *Quo Vadis*? . . . another *Spartacus* or any of the others."<sup>40</sup>

#### 4. Epic Style: The Final Duel

Since Homer's *Iliad*, the earliest epic in Western literature, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, the greatest and most influential Roman epic, stories about mythical or historical heroes have tended to end in the protagonist's "show-down" with his enemy, the story's climax. That of Livius and Commodus in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* illustrates how a scene required by plot convention can heighten our involvement to such a degree that the end itself becomes extremely poignant. We can best appreciate the visual qualities of this duel, the choreography of its action and stunts, and its high degree of stylization if we contrast it with its equivalent in *Gladiator*.

Ridley Scott, as we expect, stages the fight between Maximus and Commodus in the Colosseum. Anthony Mann, as we might not expect, places Livius and Commodus in the middle of the Roman Forum. Maximus and Commodus are armed with swords. They wildly swing away at each other. Their fight is interrupted when Commodus, by now swordless, calls to the Praetorian Prefect for a new weapon. But his command is futile. Commodus then pulls a hidden dagger from his sleeve and attacks Maximus, who is also unarmed and already near death. This treachery calls forth Maximus' last reserves of strength. Their duel now turns more brutal because they have to fight at closer range. Maximus uses his elbow, fists, and knee to pummel Commodus until he can push the villain's own dagger through Commodus' neck.

<sup>40</sup> In "Empire Demolition," a short essay about *The Fall of the Roman Empire* reprinted in the present book.

The action of this duel is simple: the two fighters rely only on brute force, not on any strategy. Scott has to resort to other ways to ensure that his spectators are thrilled, those in the theater more than those in the Colosseum. So he bombards our senses with a variety of standard film tricks. The whooshing sounds of the swords as they cut through the air and the clashing of their blades are amplified on the soundtrack. Also amplified is the wild cheering of the spectators. Then slow motion and, most of all, rapid editing provide the spectacle. Finally, and in extreme close-ups, Maximus forces the dagger into Commodus' neck, with the sound pumped up yet again. Coming from a director with a reputation for action and atmosphere, the duel in *Gladiator* is disappointing. It has been staged perfunctorily and then jazzed up artificially. It takes less than two minutes and forty-five seconds. Considered as an epic climax or as an action scene it is a failure, not least because it follows on far bigger and more spectacular action sequences: the gigantic opening battle, several arena fights, and especially the Battle of Carthage. A film critic comments:

In "Gladiator," Ridley Scott thrusts us so close to the combat that all we see is a lot of whirling and thrashing, a sword thrust here and there, a spurt of blood, a limb severed. There's hardly a scene that is cleanly and coherently staged in open space. The violence comes mainly from the editing, in the cheapening use of montage. We see this sort of flamboyant mess all the time in the movies, but almost no one complains – perhaps because we have become so accustomed to spatially incoherent movement in commercials and on MTV that it now looks normal.<sup>41</sup>

What would the climax of *Gladiator* have looked like if Scott had not had advanced computer technology at his disposal? His first film, *The Duellists* (1977), puts *Gladiator* to shame, because there Scott rose to the occasion of telling a moving, even tragic, tale of heroic antagonists

<sup>41</sup> David Denby, "Flesh and Blood," *The New Yorker* (May 15, 2000), 105. The verdict of another critic is even more devastating: "Regarding the atomized feel of the movie's action scenes, digital editing certainly isn't the only culprit. Scott . . . has roots in television and commercials, so he's perhaps predisposed toward an overreliance on close-ups and cutting. But practically none of *Gladiator*'s combat scenes have any sense of spatial integrity or character-to-character physical dynamics. With every flurry of action accomplished via rapid-fire editing, staccato jump cuts, fast motion and sound effects, you often can't quite tell who's doing what to whom. Though the immediate impact may be dazzling, the impression that lingers is hollow and mechanical." Quoted from Godfrey Cheshire, "Fall of the Empire," *Independent Weekly* (Durham, North Carolina; May 3, 2000), at <http://www.indyweek.com/gyrobase/Content?oid=oid%3A14312>.



in expressive settings, in a ravishing if somber visual style, and with gripping action.

By contrast, Mann and his team of collaborators, chief among them second-unit director Yakima Canutt, made things as tough and complex for their duelists as possible.<sup>42</sup> Livius' and Commodus' fight over the fate of the empire is one of the most exciting and suspenseful duels in the history of epic cinema. A shot-by-shot analysis or a careful viewing in slow-motion on a DVD will yield a veritable lesson in how to stage, film, and edit an action sequence. Here I limit myself to a few observations.

Most noteworthy is Mann's elegant use of the gigantic cinema screen. The widescreen format that had previously captured the same setting in panoramic views is now tightened to a small arena. Praetorians mark off a rectangular space by forming a wall of shields around Livius and Commodus, two rows on top of each other. This completely isolates them from the crowd in the Forum and makes for a claustrophobic atmosphere. They are in a cage, and a major strategy for both will be to drive the opponent into a corner. In *Gladiator* Scott imitates Mann's staging without apparently fully understanding its point, for the Praetorian Guards that surround Maximus and Commodus in an oval that imitates the curvature of the Colosseum are spaced apart from each other. Their presence serves hardly any purpose except decoration. We can find a better demonstration of effective staging in a comparable sequence in the Chinese historical epic *Hero* (2002), in which one fast and furious duel takes place on a vast desert plain. Director Zhang Yimou surrounds the duelists by a tight formation of soldiers with shields.

In their cage Livius and Commodus are further isolated by total silence, for neither the people nor the men holding up their shields can see or react to their combat – the opposite of Scott's staging, who repeatedly cuts away to the spectators, mainly Lucilla. Mann's camera takes only us, the viewers, into the cage with Commodus and Livius; only we have privileged "seats." Mann also gives us an imaginative variety of neutral and point-of-view shots. These range from tight close-ups to medium shots and fast lateral camera movements that leave the shields

<sup>42</sup> Yakima Canutt with Oliver Drake, *Stunt Man: The Autobiography of Yakima Canutt* (1979; rpt. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 202–206, describes his work on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, mainly concerning its chariot race. Canutt had previously designed and co-directed the chariot race in *Ben-Hur* with Andrew Marton (cf. the next note) and directed the second unit on *El Cid*. His comments on the duel sequence in *El Cid* at Canutt, 195 and 200–202, indicate what his approach to staging the duel in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* may have been like.

in the background blurred. Although quick action demands quick cutting, the average length of Mann's shots exceed Scott's. Mann and Canutt have no need to dazzle us with their editing. They impress us with complicated and hair-raising stunts. Commodus and Livius are armed with javelins, a more versatile kind of weapon than swords that can be thrust and thrown. They allow for greater creativity in designing stunts and make for more thrilling action. An example is when Commodus hurls his javelin at a helpless Livius who is lying on the ground. It narrowly misses him because at the last moment Livius raises himself up a little, and the javelin strikes the ground and passes *under* his body and thuds into the shields in the background. In the total silence the sound effects are thrilling. Like Scott, Mann uses turned-up sound – the whoosh and clatter of spears flying and hitting either the stones of the Forum floor or the wall of shields is highly effective. But none of this is jarring since it sounds realistic. Everything we see did take place; nothing is faked or computerized. (Experienced stuntmen of course stand in for the actors at the most dangerous moments.) Although the outcome is predictable, the climax comes as a surprise. A charging Commodus accidentally impales himself on Livius' weapon in a kind of final embrace of his former friend. Their duel has lasted only about forty-five seconds longer than the one in *Gladiator*, but it feels longer because it is more intense. It involves us more. As Mann described it:

I finally surrounded the action with shields and made a small arena – an intimate arena where two men would fight to the end – so that the whole of the enormous Forum set could now be forgotten and you were only interested in what was behind the shields.<sup>43</sup>

Mann emphasizes the fighters' isolation most effectively by including several high-angle shots of their arena, as if an implacable god or gods were looking down on puny humans. This is a well-established ancient perspective, for in the *Iliad* Zeus looks down on the battle of the Greeks

<sup>43</sup> Quoted from J. H. Fenwick and Jonathan Green-Armytage, "Now You See It: Landscape and Anthony Mann," *Sight and Sound*, 34 no. 4 (1965), 186–189, at 187. Contrast with this the gigantic battle of the Roman and Persian armies, in which we see only an anonymous mass of combatants without becoming emotionally stirred. The battle sequence, which Mann did not direct, works as spectacle but falls well below Mann's conception: "I'd designed my shots . . . but the money ran out. Samuel Bronston made Andrew Marton direct it when I was in Rome. Nothing remains of the original project." Quoted from Jean-Claude Missiaen, "A Lesson in Cinema," tr. Donald Phelps, *Cahiers du cinéma in English*, 12 (1967), 44–51, at 50. Marton's recollection is somewhat different from Mann's; cf. his words in D'Antonio, *Andrew Marton*, 423–424.

and Trojans from a high mountain.<sup>44</sup> Intelligent use of screen space, especially in widescreen format, is a hallmark of Mann's style. A film scholar regards it as a visual expression of underlying tensions between or among characters: "Mann was . . . an artist of spatial relationships. The visible distance between people in his films was their relationship. It did not *express* it. It *was* it."<sup>45</sup> The same critic notes about Mann's earlier films, especially *El Cid*, his first fictive-historical epic, that Mann possessed an "abiding interest in the strains put upon the man of honor and the way that he vindicates himself through trial of arms," that "no other director could so [clearly] elucidate violence," and that often "violence must be total if it is to succeed, and . . . its success is destructive of the man who resorts to it."<sup>46</sup> All this is true for *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Mann explained his action philosophy, as we may call it, in his essay on the film:

one must be careful not to let the concept of the spectacular run away with you. . . . the spectacle [in this film] is done entirely differently to what you would expect . . . the characters bring you into the spectacle rather than it being imposed on you without dramatic reason.

The action climax required for epic narratives should transcend mere spectacle. Here it does. It is exactly the right preparation, thematically and stylistically, for what will follow, Livius' renunciation of Rome and the auction of the empire. Viewers who have been drawn into the film intellectually and who have thrilled to its climactic duel now respond emotionally to its ending. We leave the theater with a sense of regret for the doom of Rome. No other film achieves this. But how could a director who had never before completed a film about antiquity get such results?

## 5. Anthony Mann's Road to Epic

If we consider *The Fall of the Roman Empire* within Mann's complete body of work we can better understand why this film is such a different Roman

<sup>44</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 8.41–52. On the cinematic analogy of this moment cf. my comments in "The *Iliad* and the Cinema," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 43–67, at 51, and in "Greek Myth on the Screen," in Roger D. Woodard (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 453–479, at 458.

<sup>45</sup> David Thomson, *America in the Dark: The Impact of Hollywood Films on American Culture* (New York: Morrow, 1977), 28–29.

<sup>46</sup> David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 559, in entry on Mann (558–559).

epic. Mann seems to have been interested in European culture and literature from an early age. In the words of one of his daughters:

Though it is true my father only finished the eighth grade in school in New Jersey, he had received the major part of his education at the Theosophical Society in Point Loma, California, where he was exposed to in-depth learning about the classics, dramas and writings of ancient times. The Society would put on elaborate productions in their open-air Greek amphitheater, the first in the US. He was an avid reader, as was his highly educated mother, and was deeply attracted to and appreciative of history in particular.

Mann had a “long-standing love of all themes classical as well as Shakespearean.”<sup>47</sup> Certain thematic connections to archetypal elements in classical tragedy and epic may be traced throughout Mann’s career.<sup>48</sup>

After early experiences in New York theater Mann began working in Hollywood in 1938 and started directing in 1942. He was initially restricted to “B movies,” made under difficult circumstances with extremely limited budgets and on tight shooting schedules. He had to rely on his ingenuity and versatility even to finish such films, much less to deliver a decent product. It is to his credit that part of this work has gained considerable critical recognition. Mann worked mainly in *film noir*, a genre strongly influenced stylistically by German Expressionist cinema and characterized thematically by dark tales of corruption and doom set in the urban jungle.<sup>49</sup> A pitiless fate causes crimes, betrayals

<sup>47</sup> The quotations are from an e-mail communication to me from Nina Mann (February 25, 2008). In a 2008 interview included in the Criterion Collection DVD edition of Mann’s *The Furies* she specifies that the plays produced were “the Greek classics as well as Shakespearean plays” and that Mann was strongly influenced by them for the staging of his films. Cf. below on Mann’s interest in *King Lear*.

<sup>48</sup> A full-scale biography incorporating in-depth analysis of Mann’s work does not exist. On Mann and his work see Jean-Claude Missiaen, *Anthony Mann* (Paris: Editions universitaires, 1964); Alberto Morsiani, *Anthony Mann* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1983; rpt. 1986); Philip Kemp, “Mann, Anthony,” in John Wakeman (ed.), *World Film Directors*, vol. 1 (New York: Wilson, 1987), 723–731; Fernando Alonso, *Anthony Mann* (Barcelona: Filmideal, 1997); Ángel Comas, *Anthony Mann* (Madrid: T and B Editores, 2004); and Jeanine Basinger, *Anthony Mann*, 2nd ed. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007). – I omit discussion of the less important films Mann directed, although *Men in War* (1957), set in Korea, is a gritty examination of heroism, cowardice, and the strains of combat – in it, “Mann aimed for the universality of legend” (Kemp, 728) – and *God’s Little Acre* (1958) was a personal favorite of his.

<sup>49</sup> Literature on Expressionist cinema and *film noir* is extensive. I here mention only the fundamental studies by Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, tr. Roger Greaves (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; rpt. 2008), and Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.* (New York: Viking,

by close friends or lovers, suffering, revenge, and frequently the protagonist's death. Happy endings may occur but tend to be ambivalent. The titles of Mann's most highly regarded films from 1946 to 1948 guide us to their content: *Strange Impersonation*, *Desperate*, *Railroaded*, *Raw Deal*, and *He Walked by Night* (credited to a different director but largely Mann's). Especially noteworthy is the little-known *Side Street* (1949), whose opening images – bird's-eye views of the canyons of lower Manhattan, shot at a vertical angle – impart a sense of doom to the story from its very beginning, as if we were looking down on the pointless existence of insignificant humans. By contrast, the similar shots in color and wide-screen that open Robert Wise's and Jerome Robbins's *West Side Story* (1961) are mere pictorialism. (Since the same studio produced both films, it is possible that Wise here imitated Mann.) More important for our context, however, is *Reign of Terror* (1949), Mann's first historical drama. Set during the French Revolution, its style is that of *film noir* while its plot carries strong contemporary overtones. It draws a "parallel between the political factions of the time [1794] and rival [American] gangster mobs . . . emphasizing the common atmosphere of violence, intrigue, and passion, the neurotic hunger that drove both Revolutionary leaders and Prohibition mobsters."<sup>50</sup> As *The Fall of the Roman Empire* shows on the largest scale, the past is best understood from the perspective of the present.

The second phase in Mann's work began in 1950, when he made a seamless transition to the Western, the genre of his greatest achievements. His early Westerns continue the style of *film noir*, but Mann's themes are now deepened.<sup>51</sup> The Western is at the same time a quintessential American film genre and an archetypal narrative of worldwide appeal.<sup>52</sup> Director Sam Peckinpah once defined the Western as "a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today."<sup>53</sup> The

1972). In "Action Speaks Louder than Words: The Films of Anthony Mann," a 1967 BBC interview now available in excerpts on the DVD of *The Furies*, Mann names German director F. W. Murnau as one of his influences.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from Jean-Pierre Coursodon, "Anthony Mann," in Jean-Pierre Coursodon and Pierre Sauvage (eds.), *American Directors*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 237–243, at 239.

<sup>51</sup> On the stylistic affinities of Mann's *film noir* to his early Westerns see Basinger, *Anthony Mann*, 71–79.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. André Bazin, "The Western: Or the American Film Par Excellence," in André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* tr. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967; rpt. 2005), vol. 2, 140–148.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted from Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films: A Reconsideration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 362.

Western finds close analogies in Greek epic and tragedy, the two foremost classical literary genres based on myth, and in medieval literature.<sup>54</sup> As Mann put it in a 1967 interview:

You can take any of the great dramas – [it] doesn't matter whether it's Shakespeare [or] Greek plays or what – you can always lay them in the West, and they somehow become alive, and this kind of passion and this *drama* – you can have patricide, any kind of –cide . . . in a Western, and you can get away with it because it is . . . where all action took place.<sup>55</sup>

*Devil's Doorway* and *The Furies* (both 1950), Mann's first two Westerns, are named after places, but their titles carry symbolic meaning. The former is the tragic story of an American Indian chief, a highly decorated hero of the Civil War. Returning after the war, he is confronted with racial prejudices. He is dispossessed of his farm, since only US citizens are allowed to own land. The film addresses a fundamental problem of American race relations. The United States may be a melting pot, but the original population was largely excluded, even killed off. What the wise old senator in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* advises regarding the Germans was not the case in American history or in *Devil's Doorway* regarding the Indians: "let us take them among us." But even in death the hero fights for his people and his cause. *The Furies* is much darker and reminiscent of Greek myth and tragedy in the complicated entanglements of its main characters. A self-destructive love-hate relationship between a powerful patriarchal rancher and his strong-willed daughter borders on the incestuous. She has an Electra Complex but eventually engages in a kind of conspiracy against him. At the film's end the father is dead.

Mann's next film, *Winchester '73*, made the same year, continues the theme of family violence but links it with one of the fundamental narrative motifs of classical and medieval heroic epic and of the Western genre,

<sup>54</sup> I examine thematic links between ancient myth and literature on the one hand and the Western on the other in "Classical Mythology and the Western Film," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22 (1985), 516–540. For a demonstration of how classical epic and tragedy may both characterize a particular film cf. my "Homer's *Iliad* and John Ford's *The Searchers*," in Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter Lehman (eds.), *The Searchers: Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 145–170, and "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*," in Winkler (ed.), *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, 118–147. On medieval myth and the Western cf. my "Mythologische Motive im amerikanischen Western-Film," in Jürgen Kühnel et al. (eds.), *Mittelalter-Rezeption III: Mittelalter, Massenmedien, Neue Mythen* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1988), 563–578, and, more specifically, "Fritz Lang's Epic Medievalism: From *Die Nibelungen* to the American West," *Mosaic*, 36 no. 1 (2003), 135–146.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted from "Action Speaks Louder than Words."

that of a dangerous journey. His quest for revenge on his evil brother, who had killed their father, drives the protagonist to near-madness – shades of Orestes. The film mixes the positive (heroic deeds and fearlessness) and the negative (the hero's obsession). In Mann's own words: "He was a man who could kill his own brother, so he was not really a hero" in the conventional sense.<sup>56</sup> The film also points ahead to the different outlook of Mann's two epics: first an admiring affirmation of a heroic individual's achievements in *El Cid*, then the pessimism of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. *Bend of the River* (1952) features a protagonist torn between heroism and an innate streak of violence and the friendship between two men who turn into enemies. At the center of *The Naked Spur* (1953), Mann's darkest Western and one of his masterpieces, is the moral ambiguity of its protagonist, a bounty hunter. The film restates the Homeric theme of first denying and then allowing burial of a corpse. Just as in the *Iliad* Achilles overcomes his hatred for dead Hector and wins his greatest victory – over himself – so Mann's protagonist conquers his baser nature after his obsession has driven him to inhumanity.<sup>57</sup> If John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) is the most profound and Homeric of all Westerns, *The Naked Spur* is not far behind.<sup>58</sup>

Ambivalence about society and civilization continues in *The Far Country* (1954), in which the representative of law and order is a corrupt hanging judge. The presentation of geometric formality in Mann's shots of an army fort on the border in *The Last Frontier* (1955) is later paralleled by that of the Roman border fortress in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The ending of *The Tin Star* (1957), whose hero is again an ambivalent figure (another bounty hunter), foreshadows that of Mann's Roman epic, for the protagonist turns his back on a society he despises. "*The Tin Star* demonstrates how the community brings about the death of its very

<sup>56</sup> Quoted from "Action Speaks Louder Than Words."

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 142: "the revenge taken by the [principal] character is exacted upon himself, a punishment the inner meaning of which is a denial of reason and humanity. In general, all of Mann's heroes behave as if driven by a vengeance they must inflict upon themselves for having once been human, trusting and, therefore, vulnerable." This applies to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, if not in a form quite as pure. Kitses's book contains the fundamental study of Mann's Westerns; its original publication as *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (London: Thames and Hudson / British Film Institute, 1969) was the first extensive thematic appreciation of the body of Mann's work. The older book is still valuable for the clarity of analysis and expression sometimes missing from the later version.

<sup>58</sup> Mann himself named Ford as his greatest model; cf. Missiaen, *Anthony Mann*, 8, with source reference.



soul . . . by denying the existence of evil that its own attitude creates.”<sup>59</sup>

Two other films are of even greater significance, *The Man from Laramie* (1955) and *Man of the West* (1958). Their titles indicate that Mann was moving toward archetypal aspects of myth and approaching pure epic. They tell us that the character referred to is a hero but say nothing specific about plot or settings. The man from Laramie might as well have come from anywhere else. He is searching for the killer or killers of his brother but runs afoul of the young and irresponsible son of the owner of a huge cattle kingdom. The hard-working foreman is almost another son to the owner but turns out to be corrupt. He feels slighted and exploited by the old man; eventually he kills the son and almost brings about the father's death. He is finally confronted by the hero, whose brother's death he had indirectly caused, and meets his own death. The hero rides off.

Reminiscences of classical tragedy are particularly strong in this film. The old rancher is going blind; while he can see he knows nothing about the evil that is surrounding him. Only when he is blind does he gain insight – echoes of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. The old man has had a recurring dream in which someone kills his son, and at first he mistakes the protagonist for this mysterious assassin. His dream will be fulfilled, but not by the man he suspects. It is regrettable that the screenplay did not turn the protagonist and the foreman into the old rancher's sons. If it had we would be watching a modern version of the kind of family tragedy familiar from the myths about the descendants of Tantalus and from the works of the Athenian dramatists. But we can also observe parallels to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. A father has achieved a great “empire” but is saddled with a worthless son. The old patriarch fails to ensure a smooth succession in his realm and is done in by a conspiracy carried out in his closest circle. His dissolute son is killed by the very friend who for many years has lived with him like a brother. This friend has long been an upright character who is used to undoing the damage caused by the son. But he becomes corrupt through greed and a feeling of near-Oedipal rejection by a father figure. At the end the two obvious heirs of the cattle empire are dead. Although it will continue to exist, the ranch and its greatness are lost. Whereas it has never been “conquered from without” – it grew through its owner's fights against Indians and by his treaties and business transactions – “it has destroyed itself from within,” to quote the final words of the narrator in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted from Kitses, *Horizons West*, 157.

The screenplay of *The Man from Laramie* was written by Philip Yordan, a writer who had worked with Mann on several films since *Reign of Terror*. Mann and Yordan collaborated for the last time on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>60</sup> Apparently they shared thematic interests. What Yordan once said about his approach to heroic narratives is fully applicable to Mann's Westerns and epics. With his hero figures, Yordan said, he attempted to

find again the purities of heroes of ancient tragedies, of Greek tragedies, and on this I was in perfect agreement with Anthony Mann. I wanted to re-create a tragic mythology by assigning a large role to Destiny, to Solitude, to Nobility. A man arrives, coming from nobody knows where, going to nobody knows where, or one who is torn apart by the Furies and who is desperately seeking an inner peace.<sup>61</sup>

This purity of myth is the hallmark of *Man of the West*. The fact that it was *not* written by Yordan tells us that the writer's assessment of his closeness to the director was accurate. Coming near the end of the classic Hollywood Western, *Man of the West* is as appropriate an elegy to the genre as Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* was to be three years later. The plot takes the form of a journey both geographic and symbolic. The hero has been sent to bring a schoolteacher, a traditional symbol of civilization, to New Hope, his hometown, but he comes face to face with his violent past. He is forced into a reunion with the brutish outlaw gang

<sup>60</sup> Yordan is one of the most enigmatic of Hollywood professionals. He served as front for several blacklisted screenwriters, whom he seems to have supported by giving them work and exploited by keeping a large share of credit and profit. See Pat McGilligan (ed.), *Backstory 2: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1940s and 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991; rpt. 1997), 330–381 (chapter called "Philip Yordan: The Chameleon"). Yordan held Mann in high esteem; cf. Bertrand Tavernier, "Rencontre avec Philip Yordan," *Cahiers du cinéma*, 128 (February 1962), 14–24, at 18–20. Yordan considered Mann to have had little education (Yordan at McGilligan, 356), a charge Mann's daughter specifically repudiates in her message to me from which I have quoted above. Mann and Yordan had founded their own production company in 1956. Yordan seems to have been instrumental in bringing Mann to Bronston. Yordan received principal credit for writing *El Cid*, whose chief screenwriter was blacklisted Ben Barzman, and co-credit on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted, in my translation, from Tavernier, "Rencontre avec Philip Yordan," 19–20. Borden Chase, besides Yordan Mann's most important screenwriter, had comparable views about hero figures. *Red River* (1948), the epic Western Chase wrote for director Howard Hawks, is a story about the origin and growth of a gigantic cattle empire, a crisis at the stage of its greatest extent, and the problems involved in the succession from father to adopted son.

to which he had belonged many years ago. Their leader is a perverted father figure and had once taken the protagonist under his wing. The latter eventually kills the former. New Hope never appears on the screen. And the supposedly thriving and wealthy town whose bank the outlaw gang plans to rob turns out to be nothing but ruins: a ghost town in the middle of a desert. Civilization is lost sight of. The two films by Mann and Ford “mark the end of the classical Western, summing up and laying to rest its central concern with the taming of the wilderness in the interests of the growth of civilization.”<sup>62</sup> The casting of Gary Cooper in the title part of *Man of the West* reinforces the film’s theme. Cooper was an incarnation of the traditional Western. At the time of filming he was already marked by terminal illness.

Family drama leading to tragic entanglements, violence, death, and moral ambiguity recur throughout Mann’s Westerns and epics. The strongly Oedipal nature of the Western is evident in several of Mann’s films.<sup>63</sup> It comes to the fore again in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Most of what Mann once said about Commodus is already shown in *The Man from Laramie*:

he tries to kill his father’s image, because this image is greater than his own. This is the story underneath the Oedipus drama. I don’t know of any great man who ever had a great son. This must have been a terrible thing for the son – to live with the image of his father, for although this is a love-image, it can also be a hate-image. This theme is recurrent, because it is a very strong one . . . it reaches to heights and depths beyond more mundane stories.<sup>64</sup>

Thematic coherence and “a clarity of purpose” pervade Mann’s entire career.<sup>65</sup> He is highly regarded for his visual style. Mann possessed a “flawless command of . . . landscape photography,” especially in wide-screen compositions; his work “has to be witnessed – on a big screen –

<sup>62</sup> Quoted from Robin Wood, “Man(n) of the West(ern),” *CineAction*, 46 (1998), 26–33, at 27. The title of Wood’s article, the best interpretation of *Man of the West*, is glib stylistically, but its meaning is right on target.

<sup>63</sup> On this cf. my *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo’s New Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122–153 (chapter entitled “The Complexities of Oedipus”), with comments on the Western at 132–134.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted from Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” *Screen* 10 no. 4 (1969), 32–54, at 42.

<sup>65</sup> The quotation is by Nina Mann in the interview on the DVD of *The Furies*.

before understanding can begin . . . No one has ever matched that feeling for heroic openness."<sup>66</sup>

Epics were therefore the logical next step for Mann, and he worked on two such films with unhappy results to himself. Mann prepared and started the filming of *Spartacus*, but Kirk Douglas, its producer and star, replaced him with Stanley Kubrick.<sup>67</sup> *Cimmaron* (1960) is a heroic story that spans a quarter century from the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 to World War I. But *Cimmaron* was as good as destroyed when the studio re-edited and partially re-filmed it with a different director.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, Mann's journey to historical epic was now complete. He went to Europe and Samuel Bronston. A critic concludes: "Few directors could have moved to the epic with surer credentials than Anthony Mann."<sup>69</sup> His tales of tragic heroism now took place on the largest scale. "He had an unfailing flair for selecting exteriors that were not only adapted to the requirements of the script but [also] came across as the embodiment of the psychological and moral tensions in it."<sup>70</sup>

*El Cid*, an almost perfect epic, best illustrates Mann's theme of heroism coupled with sacrifice and death.<sup>71</sup> Specific analogies to *The Fall of the Roman Empire* exist as well. The *Cid* acquires an understanding

<sup>66</sup> The three quotations are from Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 559 and 558. André Bazin, "Beauty of a Western" (1956), tr. Liz Heron, in Jim Hillier (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 165–168, speaks of Mann's "extraordinary use of CinemaScope" (167) in *The Man from Laramie*.

<sup>67</sup> On the complex production history of this film see Duncan L. Cooper, "Who Killed the Legend of Spartacus? Production, Censorship, and Reconstruction of Stanley Kubrick's Epic Film," in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 14–55.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Missiaen, *Anthony Mann*, 110–111. Mann repudiated the film, objecting strongly to the protagonist's unheroic fate. (He dies off screen.) Cf. Wicking and Pattison, "Interviews with Anthony Mann," 43, on Mann's original conception.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted from Kitses, *Horizons West*, 164. Morsiani, *Anthony Mann*, 91, verbatim, if in Italian, restates Kitses's words but without attribution. Cf. Kemp, "Mann, Anthony," 729: "As a director of epics he was clearly a natural."

<sup>70</sup> Quoted from Coursodon, "Anthony Mann," 241–242. This verdict applies directly to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, as its border fortress and the surrounding countryside illustrate.

<sup>71</sup> On this film and its connections to Mann's earlier work see my "Mythical and Cinematic Traditions in Anthony Mann's *El Cid*," *Mosaic*, 26 no. 3 (1993), 89–111, and, slightly differently, "El Cid: Ein mittelalterlicher Heldenmythos im Film," in Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich (eds.), *Mittelaltermythen*, vol. 1: *Herrscher, Helden, Heilige* (St. Gall: UVK Fachverlag für Wissenschaft und Studium, 1996), 327–340. Some of my observations above on Mann's career are taken from these articles.

of other peoples comparable to that of Marcus Aurelius; he specifically repudiates what in analogy to “the Roman way” espoused by Commodus’ henchman in the senate we may here call “the Spanish way,” the brutal treatment of the Moors by the Christians. The Cid asks: “We’ve been killing them for years. What has it brought us – peace?” He wants, as it were, a *pax Hispanica*. When his soldiers unite with those of an emir with whom the Cid is allied, we see what temporarily happens in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* among Germans and Romans. As everyone is feasting and rejoicing, the Cid asks the emir: “How can anyone say this is wrong?” He receives a prophetic reply: “They will say so – on both sides.”<sup>72</sup>

Mann was originally attracted by the ending, in which the Cid wins a decisive victory after his death, a reminiscence of *Devil’s Doorway*. Legend greatly appealed to Mann. As he once said about the Western: “It is legend – and legend makes the very best cinema. It excites the imagination more . . . legend is a concept of characters greater than life.”<sup>73</sup> So *El Cid* re-creates the past as epic-tragic myth: “The whole film has the feel of the Middle Ages about it, not the Middle Ages as it was but as the troubadours saw it.”<sup>74</sup> Thematic similarities between Mann’s two epic films are notable.<sup>75</sup> What a film scholar once wrote about the main character of *The Far Country* is true for the Cid and for Livius: “The plot of Mann’s film is the process by which the hero is forced to choose between personal comfort and social responsibility.”<sup>76</sup> But stylistic similarities are evident as well, for on *El Cid* Mann had the same set decorators, editor, and cinematographer as on *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The comments on the latter film by director Martin Scorsese apply also to the former: it “has the poignant beauty of a lost art. *The Fall of the Roman*

<sup>72</sup> Amusingly, the chapter of the film’s DVD edition (published by the same company which put out the DVD of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*) in which this ethnic, religious, and cultural harmony is achieved, is called “Bend of the River.” (The Cid and the emir meet on opposite river banks, then embrace in the middle.) Ironically, the actor who plays the enlightened and highly cultured emir will play one of Commodus’ hardliners. More ironically, Charlton Heston, who plays the Cid and who was Bronston’s and Mann’s first choice for Livius, became less tolerant later.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted from Wicking and Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” 43.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted from Jeffrey Richards, *Swordsmen of the Screen: From Douglas Fairbanks to Michael York* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 109.

<sup>75</sup> As Mann said, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* “wasn’t completely a legend though it has a legendary quality.” Quoted from Wicking and Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony Mann,” 43.

<sup>76</sup> Quoted from V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 150.

*Empire* offered a multilayered drama . . . Mann's sense of space and dramatic composition had never been more evident."<sup>77</sup>

After *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Mann lived only long enough to finish one other film and to leave his final work to be completed by others. *The Heroes of Telemark* (1965) is set in World War II and based on actual fact.<sup>78</sup> *A Dandy in Aspic* (1968) is a Cold War spy thriller about a double agent on the trail of an enemy double agent. Together the two films represent a turning away from heroic myth to realism. Critics have regarded them as signs of decline or exhaustion in Mann after his two gigantic epics.<sup>79</sup> Did the fall of Samuel Bronston and his empire then also entail the artistic fall of Anthony Mann? A conclusive answer is impossible, but Mann's last films actually continue the thematic consistency of his work. With his epics he had reached the apex of heroic cinema. *El Cid* showed the greatest possible triumph (rescue of one's country), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* the greatest possible defeat. The end of heroism necessitated the end of epic cinema, at least for Mann. *The Heroes of Telemark* then is a transitional work, a small-scale epic that marks a withdrawal from what came before. By contrast, *A Dandy in Aspic* returns Mann to his early work in *film noir*. But it is also an intensification of that work. The betrayal and corruption in the underworld of his *noir* films now pervades an entire society, a soulless and emotionless world. More important, however, is a film Mann did not live to make, a Western based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*.<sup>80</sup> Its protagonist was to be played by John Wayne, the actor who more even than Gary Cooper embodied the iconic qualities of the complex Western hero, mainly through his long association with John Ford. This film's significance – the dissolution of a kingdom and a family as a result of a good but old and exhausted ruler's failure over his succession – is immediately obvious. And the enthusiasm that Mann evinced in an interview filmed shortly before his unexpected death should warn us against hasty assumptions of his decline.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Quoted from Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson, *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese Through American Movies* (New York: Miramax Books / Hyperion, 1997), 90.

<sup>78</sup> On this film Mann was reunited with Kirk Douglas, who had dismissed him from *Spartacus*. According to Mann's widow, the two remained on friendly terms, and Douglas eventually had second thoughts about his decision. (Telephone conversation with Anna Mann; June 10, 2008.)

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Kitses, *Horizons West*, 165.

<sup>80</sup> On this project cf. Wood, "Man(n) of the West(ern)," 31.

<sup>81</sup> This interview is "Action Speaks Louder than Words," referred to and quoted from above.

It remains for this chapter to address two other aspects of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The first points to a number of weaknesses; the second amounts to a posthumous vindication of Anthony Mann's and Samuel Bronston's epic vision.

## 6. Pre-Release Cuts Made to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

The longer a film, the more easily it falls victim to cuts. This phenomenon dates back to such influential silent epics as Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) and D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), to name only two of many. According to various but rather vague sources, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* as originally filmed and edited appears to have been as much as forty minutes longer than the version now extant. The cuts have impaired the quality of the film's portrayal of some of its main figures, especially Commodus and Livius. But scenes between Livius and Lucilla, the death of Marcus Aurelius, acts of human sacrifice by the barbarians (whose result now appears only momentarily), and more extensive debates in the senate seem to have been lost. Many scenes were trimmed, presumably for reasons of length. Careful viewers will notice some jarring gaps or jumps in the story, as with the aftermath of a German ambush and the sudden appearance, in close-up, of Chief Ballomar shouting "Attack!" This attack takes place without the careful staging that would make it convincing. Although set in a rocky landscape and cave, it was filmed indoors on a soundstage, with an artificial sky briefly visible in the background. The contrast to the location filming of just a moment before is unaccountable in plot terms. A comparison with the earlier and highly atmospheric ambush of the Germans in a mysterious forest, one of the most elegant and suspenseful sequences, makes the second battle look even worse. It is doubtful that any of this was Mann's choice. In the second half the scenes involving the German settlers also seem to be cut extensively. And Livius travels to and from Rome and the East with greater facility and speed than is credible.

To indicate the nature of what may have been lost I turn to a few specific scenes that survive in a format not usually associated with films of the 1960s, although the kind of source I am about to adduce is today a regular marketing feature that goes back to the silent era. I am referring to what is now called a "novelization": a novel adapted from a film's screenplay as a "tie-in" accompanying its release. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* had such a novel, written by prolific pulp fiction professional



Harry Whittington.<sup>82</sup> Nobody, not even the author, would mistake it for literature, but Whittington delivered an effective version of the film. There is no reason today for anyone to turn to this novel, were it not that it contains descriptions of material excised from the film. Apparently, as is often the case, Whittington worked from the screenplay (although the principal screenwriter was completely unaware of his involvement), from the film's pre-release version, or from both. Authors of tie-ins have to finish well before the final cut has been assembled so that novel and film can be released together.<sup>83</sup> The novel's divergences from the film that are not evident embellishments are therefore often revealing. Some of them indicate what the writer read or saw but what filmgoers were not to see.<sup>84</sup>

The novel of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* differs from the book in some noteworthy ways. Here are a few examples. Christianity plays a considerably greater part, as when Marcus Aurelius muses on Christians and Jesus (31), Timonides instructs a young German woman named Xenia in Christian doctrine (97–103), and there is a Christian among the senators (217). Commodus' mistress Marcia, omitted in the film, is a Christian (176–177), just as she was said to have been in antiquity, and conspires against him (224). Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that Livius is not quite the faithful lover of Lucilla as the film shows him to be. The speech Timonides delivers to the senate in the film is given by Livius in the novel (125). The torture of Timonides occurs much later (187–192), and Commodus kills the gladiator Verulus not in the palace but outside, in the Forum (226). The giant hand of Sabazio in the film is a statue of the goddess Cybele in the novel, inside which Livius kills Commodus (232). The novel also indicates better than the film the duration of Commodus' rule, which corresponds to historical fact (cf. 135, 140), and it makes Didius Julianus, who bought the empire at auction, a prominent follower of Commodus. In the film he is the advocate of "the Roman way" of "strength" and "might" (cf. below) but remains anony-

<sup>82</sup> Harry Whittington, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Gold Medal Books, 1964), a paperback original with a photo of the film's Roman Forum set on its cover. The cover and the title page read Samuel Bronston's *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The back cover shows the film's main credits and photos of five of its stars. References to and quotations from the novel will be by parenthetical page number.

<sup>83</sup> Film philologists are familiar with a parallel phenomenon. A film's trailer may contain short but telling moments of scenes removed from or shortened in its release version or may show camera takes different from those used in the finished film.

<sup>84</sup> Whittington refers to the Praetorian Guard as Commodus' "national security police." Whittington's grasp of Latin is tenuous.

mous, although the cast list included in promotional materials identifies him as "Julianus."

Some of Whittington's pages close the gaps that now exist in the film's narrative. The two most significant instances warrant a brief discussion, for they throw light on three of the major characters, Commodus and Livius on the one hand and the old senator who advocates change on the other. The reunion of Livius and Commodus early in the film occurs after Marcus Aurelius has informed his general that he is to be his successor; there is some unease in Livius as a result. The two retire to Commodus' quarters in the border fortress, where they engage in a drinking contest. They talk on the stairs and then go up. Now there is an abrupt cut, and in a tight close-up Commodus is wrestling with a blond German woman, presumably a prisoner, and trying to force her to drink. She escapes and runs into a large hall, where a pensive Livius is sitting at a table. Commodus yells at the cowering woman: "I'm Caesar's son; I could have you burned alive." Here we have the first clue to Commodus' innate brutality. He then turns to Livius, who reveals Marcus Aurelius' decision about the succession. Commodus is stunned. He refers to the laughter of the gods, a kind of leitmotif to the film's portrayal of him on the road to his eventual madness. The rift between the two friends has begun. Another German woman is present in the background. Commodus, trying to hide his disappointment and anger, offers the first woman to Livius: "She is for *you*. She thinks." The other he forces to go upstairs with him; his intention is obvious. The scene dissolves over a close-up of Livius pensively looking after Commodus to a long shot of Lucilla, Livius' beloved. The sudden cut mentioned above, the abrupt appearance of the two women about whom we know nothing, and Commodus' jarring outburst to one of them violate all rules of traditional filmmaking. Jump cuts or lack of explanation must not endanger viewers' understanding, least of all when the plot is still in its early stage. The unmotivated cut proves that what Mann, most careful of directors, had filmed was tampered with extensively.

Who are these women? Why does the actress who plays the more important one receive a screen credit? For an explanation we must turn to Whittington, for he tells us what happened (47–53). Before going inside, Livius and Commodus notice "two young blonde girls chained to stakes" in "the prisoners' pit" (47). One of them is Xenia, a German princess; the other is her maid. Xenia's name was changed for the film to Helva, as the cast list shows. But her part was cut so much that she is never called by any name. Their helplessness appeals to Commodus' sadistic streak: "Something about the debased position of the two women,

bound and helpless, struck at Commodus . . . He seldom got enjoyment from ordinary pleasures any more" (47). Xenia calls on Wotan in defiance of the Romans, and Commodus orders the women to be brought to his quarters. There Xenia senses Commodus' sexual depravity. In conversation with Livius Commodus reveals his nihilism ("The Roman empire has no real meaning," 50) and his complete opposition to Marcus Aurelius' policies. He is against change and advocates brute force. As in the film he tries to compel the princess to drink ("she struck at him savagely") and threatens her with being "burned alive" (52). Commodus briefly contemplates the pleasures that might ensue from his sexual humiliation of her but then rejects her and leaves with her maid instead. There is no revelation yet about the succession. Xenia now waits for Livius to act. But "Livius did not touch her" (53). He is thinking of Lucilla and leaves without harming Xenia. She seems to feel some attraction for him, and later, when Livius has been separated from Lucilla for good, as it seems, the two of them will have an affair that at least on her part goes deeper than mere physicality (139–140, 143–144). Although she remains a minor character in the film, she appears in several sequences among the pacified Germans. At film's end she is seen being burned alive after all.

Some of what Whittington describes could never have made it onto the screen. The main reason for the studio's radical interference is obvious. The Spanish censors originally imposed a number of cuts on the pre-release version of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and restricted it to viewers above eighteen years of age, losing Samuel Bronston a large and crucial segment of his potential audience. Even Faustina, Marcus Aurelius' long-dead wife never seen on screen, caused raised eyebrows in Catholic Spain because she was an adulteress. Strangely enough, the brief sequence that opens the film's second half with Lucilla depositing the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius was also suspect. Many of the film's prints are missing this scene as a result. Fortunately Bronston had good connections to the Spanish government. He succeeded in convincing the censors of the film's "strictest morals" and "moral clarity" and in reversing the worst of their demands.<sup>85</sup>

One important moral aspect of the film hinges on the debate in the Roman senate concerning the uses of power. Here the most intriguing figure is an elder statesman who reminisces about the great emperors who ruled before Commodus and advocates enlightened changes to ensure the survival of Rome. The senator is clearly an authority figure

<sup>85</sup> Details in García de Dueñas, *El Imperio Bronston*, 247–250; quotations at 250.

to whom we should listen. Dedicated filmgoers will have known this even before he says a single word, for they will have recognized Scottish actor Finlay Currie, one of the grand old men of epic cinema.<sup>86</sup> Currie was a familiar presence in films with classical or biblical settings. He could be seen as St. Peter in *Quo Vadis* and as Balthasar in Wyler's *Ben-Hur*; in the latter film he also read the opening narration. He played Jacob in Irving Rapper's *Joseph and His Brethren* (1960), but his part in Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* was minimal (and probably cut down). More to the point is his appearance as King David in King Vidor's *Solomon and Sheba* (1959). David is old and wise but mortally ill. He claims only a peaceful legacy for himself: "I leave but one monument to my name, the unity of Israel." Acting on a vision from God ("Only in peace can Israel be made great, not in strife"), David appoints Solomon, his younger son, as his successor over Adonijah, his irresponsible elder son and the expected – not least by himself – heir to the throne. David thus precipitates a great crisis. He provokes enmity between the brothers and Adonijah's betrayal of his country to Egypt. Adonijah invades Israel with the Egyptian army and usurps the throne. He forces a reluctant Solomon into a public duel to the death and is deservedly killed. Thematic analogies concerning justifiable and irresponsible uses of power and plot similarities to *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are self-evident.

Currie's senator remains anonymous and appears in just one scene, giving only his speech. But why was such a prominent actor, whose name the opening credits had listed in tenth position, hired to play such a tiny part? The question has two answers. The actor's presence visually conveys the proper emphasis that his wise words warrant. Ancient Romans and modern classicists might invoke terms like *gravitas*, *dignitas*, or *auctoritas* to describe him. Secondly, his part as originally conceived was radically cut. Whittington gives us the evidence, because the old senator, named Caecina (as he is in the cast list), is considerably built up. Whittington introduces him as "frail, withered, almost lost in his toga, looking to be ninety, at least" (123); Currie, equally lost in *his* toga but not quite as frail, was about eighty-five.

<sup>86</sup> Here are historical epics not set in antiquity in which Currie had appeared before 1964: Arthur Kimmins's *Bonnie Prince Charlie* (1948), Henry Hathaway's *The Black Rose* and Jean Negulesco's *The Mudlark* (both 1950), Richard Thorpe's *Ivanhoe* (1952), Harold French's *Rob Roy, the Highland Rogue* (1953), Douglas Sirk's *Captain Lightfoot* (1955), Terence Young's *Zarak* (1956, set in India during the Raj), Otto Preminger's *Saint Joan* (1957), Alberto Lattuada's *The Tempest* (1958, set in the Russia of Catherine the Great), Robert Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1960, based on the novel by the other Robert Stevenson), and Michael Curtiz's *Francis of Assisi* (1961).

Whittington then describes him in ringing terms as he rises to address the senate (127):

From the rows of senators, the aged Caecina rose and stepped out to claim the floor. Heavy silence greeted him.

Caecina's voice rose pure and clear. This was a battleground he knew well, his memories going back to the struggles in these chambers during the reign of [Antoninus] Pius, and before. History of the thousand years of Rome was bright in his mind – the wrongs, the evils, the triumphs, the building, its past and its destiny.

Caecina delivers his speech, and the senate reacts appropriately (128): “One after another the senators rose to their feet, cheering the old statesman. For him there was an acclamation.” Livius is grateful. “The old man gestured tiredly, returning to his place.”

As his anonymous equivalent does in the film, this Caecina represents the link to the past, the Rome of Marcus Aurelius. Even his name is apt, for it carries a historical echo. During the last phase of the Roman Republic Aulus Caecina was close to Cicero and an adherent of Pompey. He denounced Julius Caesar and was banished. Caecina was a great orator and a learned philosopher. Some fragments of his writings survive, as does some of Cicero's correspondence with him.<sup>87</sup> Caecina's name was chosen, presumably by historical expert Basilio Franchina, for his anti-Caesarian – that is to say, anti-totalitarian – stance.

Cicero eventually fell victim to the proscriptions of Mark Antony and Octavian, the future emperor Augustus, in the wake of Caesar's assassination. And what happened to our Caecina? The film does not tell us, but Whittington and presumably the earlier cut bring him back at the moment of Rome's greatest abasement to the megalomania of Commodus. The senators slavishly beg his permission to rename Rome “the city of Commodus” and to call themselves “Commodian Body” (207). This happens in the film as well. In a vague echo of Juvenal's *Satire Four*, in which the servile council of tyrannical Emperor Domitian absurdly deliberates about a giant fish, Commodus next proposes a law that mullet be prepared only in the exact way he had himself eaten it the day before. This part is omitted from the film's release version. Livius now realizes that “the Roman senate had been perverted, debased, demoralized” (208). Commodus' Praetorians advance on him – but:

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Suetonius, *The Deified Caesar* 75.5, and Cicero, *Letters to His Friends* 6.5–9, 10.25.3, and 13.66. On the film's old senator see also my discussion in Chapter Eight.

They flinched, startled, when a voice rang out from the chamber, crackling like . . . [a] whip . . . the aged senator Caecina . . . had walked down to . . . the center of the forum [i.e. the senate floor].

In the chilled silence the old senator surveyed the faces of the other politicians wrathfully, letting his fiery gaze linger accusingly on each man.

His aged voice lashed at them.

Caecina now delivers another speech at least as long as his earlier one, in which he berates the senators (208–209):

What have you let yourselves become? . . . You have here today destroyed and despoiled your heritage . . . You are worse than all the enemies of Rome who are armed on all our frontiers. You are traitors! . . . Traitors not only to your nation – but betrayers of the whole civilized world and of centuries to come.

Caecina then predicts the fall of Rome, “the tumult and convulsive agony” to come, and the arrival of the Vandals, who will find “not a city – only its tomb – for you have today killed Rome. Rome is no more.” Caecina points at Commodus in direct accusation. Julianus now unexpectedly kills Caecina by stabbing him in the back: “Caecina straightened . . . His gray head twisted . . . as if to look one last time upon the place where he had spent most of his long and honorable life. He staggered and fell.” Julianus instigates all to shout “Hail Caesar!” The Praetorians lead Livius away. “The cheers rang around the emperor, but Commodus, shuddering, was gazing at the dead body of Caecina.”

If we subtract the melodrama from Whittington’s retelling we can see why Currie was the best casting choice for the old senator. His fate is symbolic, both as a foreshadowing of Rome’s eventual fate and as a recollection of the murdered emperor whom he resembles. The fall of the Roman Empire is still in the future, but the true Rome is already dead. Although the film succeeds in getting this point across well enough and even Mann may have agreed to eliminating this scene because of its wordiness, Caecina’s death might still have been worthy of inclusion for its poignancy.<sup>88</sup>

In the absence of thorough research for surviving footage not contained in the release version and without the kind of careful restoration that has given new life to many film classics, this chapter section has had to be rather speculative. But we understand why *The Fall of the Roman*

<sup>88</sup> As Mann said in “Action Speaks Louder than Words”: “What you *see* is the only truth” in cinema.

*Empire* would and could have been an even better film. A fair assessment of the qualities of any work of art, high or popular, ancient or modern, will consider the circumstances of its production and its later fate in order to reach a conclusive verdict. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* deserves a fully restored edition, if such is still possible. Some questions, however, may never be answered. Why, for instance, do we hear two different narrators at the beginning and end? And some baffling details may never be cleared up. When Commodus, newly in power, is addressing Roman leaders for the first time, he begins by referring to the death of Marcus Aurelius: "When the – ." But he interrupts himself and says: "When my father was dying . . ." Presumably Commodus originally meant to continue with the word "emperor." Why the change? Neither Commodus nor his listeners nor we in the audience can know yet that his true father is the gladiator Verulus. In Whittington's novel Commodus simply says: "When it was known my father was dying . . ." (110).

## 7. Imperial Powers: Rome and America

What may strike new viewers most forcefully is how topical *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is today. Its overarching theme is that of the uses and abuses of imperial power in a civilization that is culturally advanced and militarily without equal but at the same time internally divided. And it is involved in warfare on borders far away from the homeland. To overstate the case only slightly, Americans have seen parallels as well as differences between their own and Roman history for over two centuries and have wondered, often anxiously: *Are we Rome?*<sup>89</sup> Since their origins

<sup>89</sup> I here allude to the title of Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (2007; rpt. New York: Mariner Books, 2008). Cf. Jost Joffe, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: Norton, 2006; rpt. 2007); Amy Chua, *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance – and Why They Fall* (New York: Doubleday, 2007); Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: Norton, 2008); and Thomas F. Madden, *Empires of Trust: How Rome Built – and America Is Building – a New World* (New York: Dutton, 2008). Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (2000; new ed. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (2004; rpt. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), and *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), form a trilogy of interrelated studies. These are only a few among numerous recent books and articles on aspects of empire in current American politics, whose intellectual quality and political outlook vary considerably. Cf. the review article by Alan Ryan, "What Happened to the American Empire?" *The New York Review of Books* (October 23, 2008), 59–62, with brief comments on the concept of "soft power" as applied to geopolitics by political scientist Joseph Nye.



lie in a successful revolution against the mightiest empire at the time, they have been understandably reluctant to refer to their country as an empire, but the reality of power since the Louisiana Purchase and belief in Manifest Destiny – “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” the title of Emanuel Leutze’s allegorical painting of 1861 – suggest nothing less.<sup>90</sup> The following two assessments of the United States after 1945 are apt. Political scientist Arthur Schlesinger wrote, somewhat defensively, in 1949:

History has thrust a world destiny on the United States. No nation, perhaps, has become a more reluctant great power. Not conquest but homesickness moved the men of Bradley and Stilwell; Frankfurt or Tokyo were but way-stations on the road back to Gopher Prairie. Our businessmen, instead of welcoming the opportunities of empire, spend their time resisting its responsibilities. The pro-consul is such a rare political type that we become dependent on the few we have simply because we cannot replace them.<sup>91</sup>

Schlesinger’s words may sound quaint to observers of American power politics in the early twenty-first century, but they accurately describe how Americans viewed themselves in the Truman and Eisenhower years. Clark Clifford, President Harry Truman’s aide from 1946 to 1950, said in the early 1970s:

When the Second World War was over, we were the one great power in the world. The Soviets had a substantial military machine, but they could not touch us in power. We had this enormous force that had been built up. We had the greatest fleet in the world. We’d come through the war economically sound. And I think that, in addition to feeling a sense of responsibility, we also began to feel the sense of a world power, that possibly we could control the future of the world.

These words, spoken about a year after the withdrawal of the American forces from Vietnam, come from an interview in *Hearts and Minds*, Peter Davis’s classic documentary film of 1974 about that war. Confidence in

<sup>90</sup> On this see especially William Appleman Williams, *Empire As a Way of Life: An Essay on the Causes and Character of America’s Present Predicament, along with a Few Thoughts About an Alternative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980; rpt. 1982), and Stephen Burman, *The State of the American Empire: How the USA Shapes the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>91</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949; rpt. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 219.

the country's ability to control the future of the world, to make it safe for democracy and ready for the American Way of Life, had been thoroughly undermined. But less than thirty years later and in connection with new American wars, American power was once again being touted as guarantor of the Western way of life. David Frum and Richard Perle wrote in 2003:

now that the United States has become the greatest of all great powers in world history, its triumph has shown that freedom is irresistible . . . A world at peace; a world governed by law; a world in which all peoples are free to find their own destinies: That dream has not yet come true, it will not come true soon, but if it ever does come true, it will be brought into being by American armed might and defended by American might, too.<sup>92</sup>

This is only one example of how neoconservatives have come to view their country after it became the sole remaining superpower. The two writers quoted are careful to frame their passion for power in innocuous-sounding terms, as they do here:

America's vocation is not an imperial vocation. Our vocation is to support justice with power. It is a vocation that has earned us terrible enemies. It is a vocation that has made us, at our best moments, the hope of the world.<sup>93</sup>

But they are being coy. Earlier, another neoconservative apologist had not minced any words about what he called "a liberal and humanitarian imperialism, to be sure, but imperialism all the same."<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Quoted from David Frum and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2003), 275 and 279 (in the book's concluding chapter, entitled "A War for Liberty"). Frum was a speechwriter for President George W. Bush, Perle had been Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Ronald Reagan and Chairman of the Defense Policy Board Advisory Committee under President Bush from 2001–2003. Their book is a defense of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, about which Perle changed his mind in 2006. On him cf. Alan Weisman, *Prince of Darkness: Richard Perle: The Kingdom, the Power, and the End of Empire in America* (New York: Union Square Press, 2007).

<sup>93</sup> Frum and Perle, *An End to Evil*, 279, the conclusion of their book.

<sup>94</sup> Max Boot, "The Case for American Empire," *The Weekly Standard* (October 15, 2001), 27–30; quotation at 28. For the wider context cf. Monica S. Cyrino, "Gladiator and Contemporary American Society," in Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History*, 124–149, especially 144–148. Decades earlier Gore Vidal, novelist and one of the uncredited screenwriters for Wyler's *Ben-Hur*, had had an eye-opening experience in this regard concerning his series of American-historical novels with the overarching title *Narratives of Empire*: "I had been taken to task by *Time* magazine in a review of my first book of essays. . . . *Time*

Hollywood epics made after World War II frequently contain comparisons and contrasts between the Roman Empire and the American superpower. But *The Fall of the Roman Empire* reflects, and reflects on, historical analogies more openly. Compare the following disquisition on Roman imperial power by an apologist of Commodus at a time when Rome had become the greatest of all great powers in world history until then:

Caesar has asked me: "When has Rome ever been greater or stronger?" I say in answer to Caesar: "Never has Rome been greater or stronger than *now*." And what is it that has kept our empire together? Our *strength*! Our *might*!

And:

We are Romans, warriors . . . Teach them once and for all what it is to make war on Rome. *That* is the Roman way!

The debate in the senate is about the admission of barbarians into the empire as Roman citizens. Far-right arguments in modern American debates about immigration can echo that voiced here by Commodus' henchman down to a close verbal similarity. Patrick Buchanan draws the following parallel between Rome and America in regard to Emperor Valens' admission of "a great horde of [Gothic] refugees" into the empire in AD 376. Valens was killed in a revolt by Goths two years later at the Battle of Hadrianople. Buchanan concludes from this, with apparent satisfaction: "What Valens had done was the Christian thing to do, but it had never been the Roman thing to do." To Buchanan the Roman thing is preferable.<sup>95</sup> To Buchanan, *that* is the American way.

Our strength, our might – to be used against the barbarians at the gates. Several times in twentieth-century history fences, walls, or barriers were built in the name of security and defense in order to keep others out: in French Algeria, in Northern Ireland, on the US–Mexican border,

wrote that I had dared to refer to our minatory global presence as 'an empire' which of course it could *not* be as we were, in the Luce publications, Christian goodness incarnate. It seems I had . . . said the unsayable too soon. I was subversive." Quoted from Gore Vidal, *Point to Point Navigation: A Memoir, 1964–2006* (2006; rpt. New York: Vintage, 2007), 123.

<sup>95</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan, *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* (New York: St. Martin's, 2006; rpt. 2007), 3. Buchanan bases his analysis – if that is the right word, since nuance is not his strong suit – on, and quotes from, Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; rpt. 2006), xi and 158.

and on the West Bank of the Jordan River. Their efficacy is debatable.<sup>96</sup> Moderate Americans may consider Buchanan's policies on immigration unrealistic, just as viewers of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are not meant to agree with the speaker's naked expression of the realpolitik of imperial power. The elder statesman rebukes him:

There are millions . . . waiting at our gates. If we do not open these gates, they will break them down and destroy us. But instead, let us grow ever bigger, ever greater; let us take them among us.

I discuss the debate on power and morality in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* in greater detail in Chapter Eight. But the similarity in the stance of today's neoconservatives and of the fictional Roman is striking. It indicates how topical *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is (and may remain). Film critic and historian Richard Corliss accordingly began an appreciation of Mann's career in 2006 in the following way: "Do you think old movies can't speak to today's concerns? See some of Anthony Mann's films and think again. They spoke for their time; they speak to ours."<sup>97</sup> After discussing *El Cid* in the opening section of his article (called "Jihads"), Corliss goes over Mann's most important films and points out their current relevance. About *The Fall of the Roman Empire* he is predictably as critical as many others have been, but his first mention of it is this:

The villain of Mann's 1964 *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is the Emperor Commodus (Christopher Plummer), a weak man with a drunken past who says he was divinely chosen to make war against the Middle Eastern tribes. His one sensible adviser, Timonides (James Mason), warns that "Their hatred will live for centuries to come. Rivers of Roman blood will pay for this. You will make nations of them, killers of them." But Commodus is deaf to pleas of reason: "You will tell Egypt, Syria, the entire eastern half of the Empire, that if there is the slightest resistance to my orders, I will destroy them." He is also bent on redressing what he sees as the military flabbiness of an earlier President – sorry, Emperor: "You must also let them know they must forget the weakness of my father."

The heading that Corliss gives this description is "Imperial hubris." His quotation of Timonides is imprecise – Timonides does not use the words

<sup>96</sup> On the West Bank barrier as a particularly instructive example see Sylvain Cypel, *Walled: Israeli Society at an Impasse* (New York: Other Press, 2007), and Amos Elon, "Olmert and Israel: The Change," *The New York Review of Books* (February 14, 2008), 23–26.

<sup>97</sup> Richard Corliss, "Mann of the Hour," *Time* (August 4, 2006); quoted from <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1223014,00.html>.

“nations” or “killers” – but Corliss is right to point out that *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is an “investigation of that favorite Mann strategy: the debate between urgent humanism and mad militarism.”<sup>98</sup> Another film scholar has observed:

The important issue is raised of how far imperialism . . . conflicts with personal liberties . . . *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was a trail-blazer in several ways, but it was also one of the last of its kind [and] consciously pares down the requirements of the historical epic to the bare essentials.<sup>99</sup>

The conflict of state power and individual rights and the debate about citizenship and immigration as evinced in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are also due to the personal experience of blacklisted screenwriter Ben Barzman. Born in Canada, he had become an American citizen in order to serve in the US Navy, but the status of his health prevented him from taking up his commission. He had joined the Communist Party and fled the United States with his family during the hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.<sup>100</sup> But even in exile he preserved a strong feeling of attachment to the country he had adopted as his home. To viewers aware of this modern background of the film’s plot the enlightened perspective in the speeches of Marcus Aurelius, Timonides, and the old senator takes on added resonance. To no small degree the three Romans say about their country what one American had been feeling about his. The greatness of Rome in this film, being squandered by an irresponsible government, parallels the contemporary situation, in which some of the ideals that define the greatness of America have been abandoned.

The subject of personal or group liberties in conflict with oppressors is crucial to virtually all American or American-based history films and reappears in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, but with one significant change. This film attempts an appreciation of the greatness of Rome in terms of culture and civilization, not of imperialism. This latter side surfaces with the announcement – better, the threat – by Commodus of the naked militarism he intends to apply and in the defense of this strategy

<sup>98</sup> More jarring, historically, is his exaggerated assertion about Commodus and Christianity shortly after. But cf., e.g., Fulvio Grosso, *La lotta politica al tempo di Commodo* (Turin: Accademie delle scienze, 1964), 669–678.

<sup>99</sup> Elly, *The Epic Film*, 108.

<sup>100</sup> Barzman’s wife gives a detailed account in *The Red and the Blacklist*, to which I refer interested readers.

by his henchmen. Without wishing to advance any political message, I quote a modern historian and political commentator on the situation of the United States concerning Iran in the summer of 2008:

At a moment of serious challenge, battered by two wars, ballooning debt, and a faltering economy, the United States appears to have lost its capacity to think clearly. Consider what passes for national discussion on the matter of Iran. The open question is whether the United States should or will attack Iran [over the issue of nuclear weapons] . . . President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney are the primary authors of these threats, but others join them in proclaiming that “all options” must remain “on the table.” The option they wish to emphasize is the option of military attack . . . Is there anyone outside the US government who thinks it makes sense to invite trouble on this scale? . . . Bush has a history. On his own authority, without the sanction of any international body, he attacked Iraq five years ago and precipitated a bloody chain of events that shows no sign of ending . . . Talking, negotiating, proposing alternatives . . . – in short, all the other “options on the table” – came to be seen [during the 1990s] in certain Republican [Party] circles as time-wasting, irresolute, and futile – a pattern of weakness that invites defiance.<sup>101</sup>

Even if we keep obvious differences in mind, most of this analysis could describe the Rome of Commodus in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. The “Roman way” as demonstrated by his rule seems to have found an equivalent in a newly proposed “American way.” Commodus’ announcement of his New World Order that Corliss quoted in 2006 (“They must forget the weakness of my father”) sounds even more important in 2008. Which other historical film can claim such topicality?

*The Fall of the Roman Empire* delivers the excitement, spectacle, action, and romance audiences expect from their epics, but it transcends them. The film articulates the meaning of historical cinema with greater eloquence, passion, and conviction than any other ancient epics have managed to do. We may compare a moment near the end of Wyler’s *Ben-Hur*, perhaps the most famous of all films set in a world ruled by Rome and one that casts a long shadow even over Mann’s. (Noteworthy in both is the theme of male friendship leading to mortal enmity.) Pontius Pilate informs Ben-Hur that he has received Roman citizenship, a major concern in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, but Ben-Hur rejects it together

<sup>101</sup> Thomas Powers, “Iran: The Threat,” *The New York Review of Books* (July 17, 2008), 9–11; quotations at 9–10. For a wider perspective cf. Thomas Powers, *The Military Error: Baghdad and Beyond in America’s War of Choice* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008).

with what he calls “the cruelty of Rome.” Pilate then explains to him the nature of empire:

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. A grown man knows the world he lives in, and for the present the world is Rome . . . when I go up those stairs I become the hand of Caesar, ready to crush all those who challenge his authority. There are too many small men of envy and ambition, who try to disrupt the government of Rome.

These words fully serve the purpose of the story in which they occur, but that story is about religious edification (Christianity vs. paganism), not about the nature of a pre- or non-Christian civilization. As a result, its Rome is an evil empire.<sup>102</sup> And *Ben-Hur* is an action film, whose star once characterized it as “a melodrama . . . basically about a chariot race.”<sup>103</sup> The morality of secular power, central to *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, is incidental to *Ben-Hur*, which deals more with the spiritual power of the meek who shall inherit the earth. *Ben-Hur* characterizes his and his family’s fate as “a tragedy.” Only by the grace of God will the course of human suffering and oppression be reversed. When the film is reaching its ending, any discussion of power and empire has been forgotten. The poignant epilogue to *The Fall of the Roman Empire* resonates wider and deeper: “A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within.”

*Spartacus*, a film which Anthony Mann had been originally set to direct, is often called “the thinking man’s epic.” This description is accurate enough, but the film about ancient Roman history that most deserves this title and that demands thinking and feeling viewers is *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. It gives us the sense of what Pliny the Elder, the great Roman scholar and scientist, once memorably called “the immense majesty of the Roman peace.”<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Cf. my comments on *Ben-Hur* in “The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945,” 69–72.

<sup>103</sup> The quotation is taken from an interview included among the supplemental materials on the 1996 laserdisc edition of *El Cid*. *El Cid* was Heston’s immediate follow-up to *Ben-Hur*. He also observes that the medieval epic was “a real story” about a hero.

<sup>104</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 27.1.3: *immensa Romanae pacis maiestate*. In the next sentence Pliny expresses the wish that these gifts of the gods to the human race might be eternal.