

Cinema and the Fall of Rome

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I.

In A.D. 357 Emperor Constantius II visited the city of Rome. The historian Ammianus Marcellinus describes what effect its imposing sights had on him:

when he had come to the Rostra, the most renowned forum of ancient dominion, he stood amazed; and on every side on which his eyes rested he was dazzled by the array of marvellous sights. . . . Then, as he surveyed the sections of the city and its suburbs, lying within the summits of the seven hills, along their slopes, or on level ground, he thought that whatever first met his gaze towered above all the rest; the sanctuaries of Tarpeian Jupiter so far surpassing as things divine excel those of the earth; the baths built up to the measure of provinces; the huge bulk of the amphitheatre . . . to whose top human eyesight barely ascends; the Pantheon . . . vaulted over in lofty beauty . . . and . . . the other adornments of the Eternal City. But when he came to the Forum of Trajan, a construction unique under the heavens . . . and admirable even in the unanimous opinion of the gods, he stood fast in amazement, turning his attention to the gigantic complex about him, begging description and never again to be imitated by mortal men.¹

Ammianus' account conveys the awe which Rome's grandeur could evoke in the times of the city's greatest beauty. Over the centuries, however, its appearance was to change dramatically. In 1430 Poggio Bracciolini and a friend

ascended the Capitoline hill, reposed themselves among the ruins of columns and temples, and viewed from that commanding spot the wide and various prospect of desolation. The place and the object gave ample scope for moralising on the vicissitudes of fortune, which spares neither man nor the proudest of his works, which buries empires and cities in a common grave; and it was agreed that, in proportion to her former greatness, the fall of Rome was the more awful and deplorable.

Other observers were to echo Poggio's emotional response to the sight of "the shapeless and enormous fragments" and "the stupendous relics," which had once been the imperial city.² In the early sixteenth century, Raphael mourned

¹ Amm. Marc. 16.13–15, quoted from Rolfe 249–51 (slightly adapted). I am indebted to *TAPA*'s editor and referee for helpful suggestions.

² The three quotations are from Gibbon 6: 616–17.

“the little which remains of the ancient mother of glory” in his report to Pope Leo X on the current state of the ruins. His knowledge of ancient architecture, he points out, “has given me the greatest pleasure: on the other hand the greatest grief. For I behold this noble city, which was the queen of the world, so wretchedly wounded as to be almost a corpse.”³ Michel de Montaigne, who traveled in Italy in 1580-81, tells us through his secretary that what he saw of Rome

was nothing but its sepulcher. The world, hostile to its long domination, had first broken and shattered all the parts of this wonderful body; and because, even though quite dead, overthrown, and disfigured, it still terrified the world, the world had buried its very ruin. . . . He feared further, seeing the space that this tomb occupies, that we were not aware of all of it, and that the sepulcher itself was for the most part buried. . . . He thought that an ancient Roman could not recognize the site of his city even if he saw it. (Montaigne 79-80)

The physical decline and fall of Rome, which these and other writers have described so vividly, was counteracted at least to some extent by a new rise of Rome in the artistic imagination of the West. Aided by increasing archeological knowledge, such as the discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum, the visual and literary arts brought about a resurrection of ancient Rome and the Roman world. Edward Gibbon tells in his *Memoirs*: “it was at Rome, . . . as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol . . . that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind” (Gibbon 1: lxvii). Similarly, painting and sculpture, poetry and drama with classical or classicizing subjects as well as public and private architecture imitating the ancient orders more or less faithfully attest to the enduring life of antiquity since the Renaissance among the upper and upper-middle classes of Europe and later of the New World. In the nineteenth century, familiarity with antiquity widened considerably when popular culture discovered the classical past. Middle- to low-brow novels such as Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* (1880) became a publishing phenomenon, and stage adaptations of such works as well as “toga plays” written directly for the theater attracted wide audiences.⁴

The visual and literary arts in both high and low culture have always combined fact with fiction when their subject was history, particularly a distant past not easily recovered. Ancient Rome even more than Greece has assumed a regular place in popular culture. There are, of course, embarrassments as well

³ Raphael, “A Report to the Pope on Ancient Rome” (Holt 289-96; quotations at 291 and 290).

⁴ On toga plays (and early films) see now Mayer 1-22. Cf. Hirsch 31-32.

as riches—embarrassments because popular media are often gleefully unconcerned with fact, stereotypical and hence predictable in plot, and unabashedly commercial; riches because artists may be fascinated by their subject, see inherent merit and not only money in it, and convey their enthusiasm to their audiences. In such cases their imagination can restore the past to a life immediately accessible to their contemporaries and more vivid than purely scholarly endeavors ever could do. A loving recreation of the past may even lead to highly accomplished new works which hold up to critical analysis if approached on their own terms. But on whichever level we encounter ancient Rome, it is always there. As the narrator observes in Walter Pater's largely autobiographical novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), which is set in the age of Marcus Aurelius: "That age and our own have much in common—many difficulties and hopes. Let the reader pardon me if here and there I seem to be passing from Marius to his modern representatives—from Rome, to Paris or London."⁵ In this Pater follows Matthew Arnold, who in 1863 had observed that Marcus Aurelius "lived and acted in a state of society modern by its essential characteristics, in an epoch akin to our own" and that he "thus becomes for us a man like ourselves."⁶

Until the end of the nineteenth century, popular and high art recreated Rome in traditional ways. In the twentieth century, however, we have a new medium, one which combines various aspects of the traditional arts with technological advances and provides new ways of artistic expression. To Richard Wagner the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was opera; on the popular level the cinema may lay claim to that title today. Poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau aptly called it the Tenth Muse. Despite its origins in low-class entertainment, cinema has time and again proven its high artistic potential. And we are fortunate that the creative talents—and yes, the commercial instincts—of filmmakers have given us an embarrassment of Greek and Roman riches on the screen since the beginnings of cinema. In Hollywood such films range from silent shorts to prestigious productions like Fred Niblo's and William Wyler's versions of *Ben-Hur* (1926, 1959) and to biblical and historical spectacles simultaneously salacious and solemn, of which the films of Cecil B. DeMille are the best example. The Hollywood tradition culminates in the huge epics of the

⁵ Pater 181; cf. the editor's "Introduction" at 23-24. His observation, "what is not factually true is probably true psychologically" (18), characterizes not only the novel but all accomplished artistic recreations of the past in both high and popular culture.

⁶ Arnold 140; cf. 136: "this truly modern striver and thinker . . . a present source." Allott has shown that Arnold's essay "Marcus Aurelius," from which the preceding quotations are taken, and his 1869 essay "On the Modern Element in Literature" were the sources of Pater's parallel between Antonine Rome and Victorian England in *Marius the Epicurean*.

1950s and early 1960s.⁷ But we should not dismiss these films as quaint and naive entertainments of days past, as sociological curios, or as the obscure objects of desire for film fanatics. The films deserve serious consideration in their own right. Since they reach wide audiences all over the world, they influence more peoples' views of the past than historians or classical scholars might think (or wish). In the words of Gore Vidal: "In the end, he who screens the history makes the history." Vidal cites as an example of this aspect of screening the past the remake of *Ben-Hur*, on which he and Christopher Fry had been the principal, although uncredited, screenwriters: "William Wyler studied not Roman history but other Roman movies in preparation" for his film.⁸

I have argued elsewhere in greater detail for the significance of the cinema to modern studies of antiquity and have pointed to the interdisciplinary and intellectually rewarding nature of research and teaching which links classical and film studies, so I need not dwell on this topic at any length here. (Cf. "Introduction" in Winkler 1991.) In the present paper, I turn to one particular film as an example of the cinema's ability to revive Rome's material and historic greatness and to transport us back to a city whose ruins have been miraculously mended. More importantly, however, I intend my examination of this film to serve as a test case, as it were, for the cinema's important role in the reception of Roman culture and history. This film, I maintain, provides an illuminating view of ancient Rome in the mid-twentieth century which is worth the professional consideration of historians and classicists as an accomplished work of popular art, a work which throws light on antiquity, on the social climate of its own time, and even on an influential moment in the modern historiography of Rome.

II.

In 1964 independent producer Samuel Bronston released *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, directed with meticulous care by Anthony Mann. Mann's earliest cinematic experience of antiquity had been as uncredited director of the Fire of Rome sequence in *Quo Vadis* (1951); he later prepared and began shooting *Spartacus* (1960; the opening scene of the film's released version is his.) In *The Fall of the Roman Empire* Mann combined the best elements of popular enter-

⁷ On Hollywood's ancient epics, see the witty and indispensable chapter of Wood 165-88, esp. 173-80; also Hirsch 11-28, esp. 12. Further details *passim* in Solomon, Elley, and Fraser.

⁸ Vidal 81 and 84. A similar perspective at Fraser xi-xiii, who, however, breaks a lance for history in cinema.

tainment with an evident affection for his subject. He deserves credit for bringing to the screen the most intelligent of all Roman epics.⁹

The Fall of the Roman Empire is set in the last days of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 180) and during the reign of Commodus. It does not adhere to all historical facts about this era, most notably in the manner of Commodus' death, and it simplifies Roman administration, the family history of Marcus Aurelius, and several other aspects of Roman culture and history for the sake of as tight and coherent a narrative as the grand subject allows. The film also resorts to imagination and invention, although within the frame of the historically possible. In two major instances, its very liberty with facts points to the extensive research that must have gone into the film's preparation. As Mann was correct to point out: "These were all part of the things I had read" (Wicking and Pattison 54). Thus the film adopts the rumor, reported in the *Historia Augusta*, that Commodus was the son not of Marcus Aurelius but of a gladiator (Hist. Aug. *M. Anton.* 19.1-7); the revelation of Commodus' "real" father's identity provides for a dramatic plot twist. In the case of Marcus Aurelius' death, both the cause and the manner of bringing it about are based on possibilities mentioned in ancient sources. The emperor, ailing and already close to death, is killed by conspirators who want to ensure the succession for Commodus; this follows the reason given by Cassius Dio in his *Roman History* at 72.33.4. The blind Cleander—only the name is historical—tricks Marcus into accepting the poisoned half of an apple. He has cut the apple in full view of his victim with a knife whose blade is smeared with poison on one side only; Cleander eats the other half without any risk to himself. This ingenious plot device is lifted from the *Historia Augusta*: Marcus Aurelius was rumored to have killed Lucius Verus in exactly the same manner by offering him the poisoned part of a sow's womb while keeping the good portion for himself (Hist. Aug. *M. Anton.* 15.5, part of a later interpolation into the text). The rumor was rejected as groundless even in antiquity (Hist. Aug. *Verus* 11.2-4).

Despite such inaccuracies and, in the cases just mentioned, because of them, the film convincingly evokes the social and political atmosphere of the time portrayed: the imposing beauty of Rome, the power of its empire, and the

⁹ Immediately before this film, Mann had directed, also for Bronston, one of the most accomplished of all medieval epics, *El Cid* (1961). On *El Cid* as a successful example of how to present a complex literary and mythic-historical subject cinematically, see my discussion at Winkler 1993. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is available on laserdisc in widescreen format. It goes without saying (and that is why it bears saying) that all films reveal their full impact and quality only when viewed in good prints and in their original aspect ratio on a large cinema screen. On spectators' involvement when watching widescreen cinema and on the "pan and scan" adaptations made for television and video, see Belton 183-228.

eventual destruction of both. According to the first three chapters of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Rome had reached the zenith of peace and civilization, and the year 180 was the turning point, the beginning of the fall.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century Matthew Arnold echoed Gibbon with almost ecstatic praise of Marcus Aurelius as "perhaps the most beautiful figure in history" and "one of the best of men" (Arnold 140). The film conforms to this tradition. Its most remarkable feature, one which sets it apart from conventional films, is that it examines the decline in purely Roman terms, that is to say, not as the conflict between paganism and Christianity which most cinemagoers would have expected. This obvious influence of Gibbon is the more noteworthy because Will Durant, co-author with his wife Ariel of *Caesar and Christ*, is credited as a consultant to the filmmakers. Christianity, in fact, appears in the most understated way toward the end as a *chi-rho* pendant worn by the Greek philosopher Timonides, a former adviser of Marcus Aurelius, and is never even mentioned by name. This accords with the fact that Christianity was not a political force in the late second century. (Galinsky 56 briefly addresses the cinema's regular distortion of this topic.) Anthony Mann thus corrects the stereotypical perspective of most Hollywood films in which pagan Rome, organized like a military dictatorship, serves as the oppressive but eventually doomed opponent of a new and spiritually free world created by Christianity. As Mann himself expressed it: "I did not want to make another *Quo Vadis* . . . or any of the others. . . . 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" (Mann 332). With this perspective Mann avoids all the religious sermonizing on the eternal conflict between evil paganism and Christianity as the only true and saving faith in earlier films such as DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), *Quo Vadis*, *The Robe* (1952), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), and both versions of *Ben-Hur*.

Mann's film contains strong contemporary overtones which reinforce the meaning of the story being told. The subject of an empire's fall is presented

¹⁰ Cf. esp. Gibbon 1: 3; his panegyric, as it may be called, to the greatness of Rome culminates in the confident assertion: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus" (Gibbon 1: 90). Gibbon follows the verdict of Cassius Dio 72.36.4, that upon the death of Marcus Aurelius a kingdom of gold changed into one of iron and rust. The differences in style and purpose between the Column of Trajan and the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, as discussed by Andreae 206-7, provide a visual illustration of the change from an age of conquest to one of uncertainty. Cf. Gibbon 1: 90-95 on the precarious nature of the Romans' happiness. Under Trajan the Roman empire had reached its greatest extent ever.

and examined in light of the American experience after World War II. Given the founding fathers' close spiritual ties to ancient Rome, it is not surprising that American political and historical thought should point out parallels between the rise of Rome and the rise of America to the status of superpower.¹¹ The very architecture of the American empire's capital will have reminded many of this analogy. Gore Vidal's childhood reminiscences are one example of the phenomenon: "I was steeped in Rome. I also lived in a city whose marble columns were a self-conscious duplicate of the old capital of the world. Of course Washington then lacked six of the seven hills and a contiguous world empire. Later, we got the empire but not the hills. . . . There was the temple [the Lincoln Memorial] . . . at the heart of the city. Once I got interested in Rome and Greece, I used to haunt that part of Washington, imagining myself in ancient Rome" (Vidal 51-52 and 67-68). Awareness of historical precedent for a rise to world power, however, and the knowledge of the eventual fall of Rome raises the unavoidable question about the possibility or even inevitability of the American empire's future decline and fall.¹² This question has indeed been cause for concern among Americans, never more than when the U.S. was at the height of a Cold War with the world's second superpower while yet a third one, China, was emerging, and when the country came to be increasingly

¹¹ Romilly 63-84 ("The Organization of Power") mentions, albeit briefly, the United States in connection with Rome's rise and discusses Greek views on preserving power and avoiding decline (Isocrates, Polybius). On Rome and America in general see especially Reinhold, Vance, Galinsky, and Richard. Haase now gives a general introduction to the subject and a comprehensive bibliography.

¹² On this, Galinsky 53-73 ("The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Are There Modern Parallels?"), with additional references (173-75) and a list of the 210 different and frequently contradictory reasons for the fall of Rome collected at Demandt 695; see esp. Galinsky 63-70 ("America and Rome: Some Comparisons"). The analogy reappeared recently at Brimelow 131-33, on which Lind 109 comments: "In the book's most ludicrous section, Brimelow compares today's immigrants from Latin America and Asia to ancient Germanic barbarians: 'In some ways, the nearest thing to a precedent for today's world in motion appears to be the famous *Volkwanderung*'—he means *Völkerwanderung*—'the great 'movement of peoples' in the Fifth century that saw Germanic tribes overrun the Western Roman Empire.' . . . Brimelow hastens to declare that the 'German war bands' were less of a threat to Roman cultural unity than Mexican-American and Korean-American immigrants are to the integrity of American society, because, after all, 'the Germans were Western Europeans.' " (As no reviewer fails to point out, Brimelow is a naturalized American citizen who was born in Britain, emigrated to Canada, and from there came to the U.S.) Actually, C. B. DeMille had explained it all much earlier when he was working on *The Sign of the Cross*, set in the age of Nero: "Do you realize the close analogy between conditions today in the United States and the Roman Empire prior to the fall? . . . Unless America returns to the pure ideals of our legendary for[e]bears, it will pass into oblivion as Rome did" (Higham 216).

embroiled in the Vietnam war. Naturally, the cinema reflected the current political climate.¹³

So the drama we watch unfold contains a serious modern undercurrent which is reflected in Anthony Mann's consistent avoidance of all the empty pomp and mindless spectacle generally associated with epic cinema. Genre conventions such as battles, duels, and the obligatory chariot race are newly imagined and take on unusual visual characteristics. The first of the two major battles is more in the nature of a skirmish and anything but a glorious victory: it leads to a *decimatio* of Roman soldiers. The race involves only two chariots, and in over three hours of screen time the Circus Maximus never appears.¹⁴ Mann himself expressed his approach to the subject of his film in the following terms:

The reason for making *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is that it is as modern today as it was in the history that Gibbon wrote: if you read Gibbon . . . it is like seeing the future as well as the past. The future is the thing that interested me in the subject. . . . But 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. (Mann 332 and 335)

Mann credits Gibbon with providing the "inspiration" for his film, but at the same time he maintains his creative independence from the historian (Mann 332). In this he is correct because he tells a tale whose ostensible "hero," the general Livius, is the scriptwriters' invention. Nevertheless, his understanding of Gibbon and of the importance of their common subject leads him to reject the facile formulae on which Hollywood had relied for decades. Since Mann was the most articulate director of historical epics, his words deserve quoting in some detail. What he has said about *The Fall of the Roman Empire* applies to all artists who have to strike a balance between historical fact and an imaginative recreation of the past:

all we were trying to do was dramatize how an empire fell. . . . I didn't want to make the history so close that it would impair the film . . . if . . .

¹³ See Slotkin 504-12 on the political aspects of epic cinema from 1960 to 1965. Nadel provides a detailed (but occasionally jargon-riddled) account of DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) as a covert Cold War epic.

¹⁴ Wood 178: "the abstention seems almost ascetic, a quirky touch of originality, the signature of a movie wanting to be different." Cf. Hirsch 29 and Elley 108-9. This is not to say that the chariot race in particular does not deliver the thrills; on the contrary, it takes place where

everything [in it] is historical, then you don't have [dramatic] liberty. . . . inaccuracies from an historical point of view . . . are not important. The most important thing is that you get the feeling of history.¹⁵

It hardly needs pointing out that contemporary overtones are an integral part of historical scholarship as well. About the leading modern historians of antiquity since the time of Gibbon, Karl Christ has observed that none of them can be understood unless we take into account their life experiences and the cultural climate in which they lived and that only rarely if ever has there been a pure historiography; he concludes that some of their greatest works have become particularly striking expressions of their own time.¹⁶

Mann's approach thus explains the film's parallels to contemporary America. As he himself said: "we tried to make it all as modern as possible so that it could be related to any society; so that people would understand" (Wicking and Pattison 54; cf. Basinger 179). For this reason Mann focuses on the theme of peaceful coexistence and on political and social integration both of the diverse populations within the empire's boundaries and of the enemies outside but close to its borders. In this way he brings about an immediate level of understanding in his audience of what otherwise might remain distant or alien. Early in the film Marcus Aurelius observes to his general Livius, whom he has chosen as his successor instead of Commodus: "Rome has existed for a thousand years. It is time we found a peaceful way to live with those you call barbarians." Marcus Aurelius voices this conviction while at a Roman fortress on the Danube frontier, where he conducts what appears to the viewer as a long and arduous campaign—as was indeed the case for the historical emperor. Appropriately, the setting emphasizes the political importance of the border and conveys to the audience a feel for the vast extent of the empire and the administrative and military problems which the empire's very size presented. The word "Rome," the film makes clear, no longer refers simply to a city or a city-state or even to the countries surrounding the Mediterranean; rather, it

nobody would expect it or believe it possible. The reason, however, is more than quirkiness. For a look behind these scenes, see Canutt 202-5.

¹⁵ The quotations are from Wicking and Pattison 53; Mann 336. Mann's perspective is in keeping with Aristotle's on the superiority of tragedy, the representative of all creative arts, over historiography (*Poet.* 1451a37-1452a11); cf. Winkler 1993: 108-9. The discussion of historical authenticity in cinema at Solomon 21-23, although without reference to Mann, corroborates the director's position.

¹⁶ Christ 6-7: "keiner der hier in Rede stehenden Historiker ist ohne die Berücksichtigung seiner Gegenwartserlebnisse und seiner geistigen Erfahrungen zu begreifen. Eine histoire pure hat es auch in der Alten Geschichte nur selten gegeben. . . . Manche der klassischen althistorischen Darstellungen sind so zugleich ein besonders sinnfälliger Ausdruck ihrer Zeit geworden."

encompasses most of the world then known. In keeping with this perspective, but in radical denial of any viewer's expectations of what Roman epics should look like on the screen, Mann does not move the scene to the city of Rome until more than a quarter of the film is over. Even so, he will return to the border fortress time and again in the course of the film. The point he makes with this is as evident as it is historically correct: imperial power depends on military power, and military power resides on the borders of the empire—an unobtrusive lesson in imperial Roman history. Moreover, seeing the Roman costumes before the background of a wintry landscape dominated by a mysterious forest primeval comes as a surprise, perhaps even shock, to viewers who are accustomed, from films like *Quo Vadis* or *Spartacus*, chiefly to the warmth and opulence of the city of Rome. Again it is obvious that Mann consciously separates himself from genre conventions.

If we keep the preceding observations in mind, the chief point of criticism leveled against *The Fall of the Roman Empire* becomes moot. When critics complain that the film “has no central dominant hero” (so Basinger 178), they ignore the large canvas on which Mann must present and develop his theme. It would be a distortion of history if everything centered on one individual who is constantly on the screen to ensure audience identification or on a pair of noble lovers, as is often the case in conventional spectacles. To do justice to his subject, Mann simply cannot make the fall of the empire dependent upon the actions, even if they are heroic, of just one man. Had he done so, he would have made only another cliché-ridden film, the kind in which empires must crumble—or volcanoes erupt, etc.—to bring about the lovers' union and ever-lasting happiness. History, the true “hero” of Mann's film, would have been reduced to a mere backdrop for stereotypical melodrama.

In the film's first large-scale sequence the emperor addresses the kings, chieftains, and leaders who visit him at the fort from all corners of the empire—a historical impossibility but an early demonstration that Mann integrates spectacle into the narrative at important moments and does not simply throw it in for its own sake. Marcus Aurelius' speech echoes that of the Emperor Claudius in A.D. 48 on the traditional policy of integration which had made Rome great from its earliest days. Claudius had said to the senate:

The experience[s] of my own ancestors . . . encourage me to adopt the same national policy, by bringing excellence to Rome from whatever source. . . . Italy . . . unit[ed] not merely individuals but whole territories and peoples under the name of Rome. . . . our next step was to make citizens of the finest provincials too: we added them to our ex-soldiers in settlements throughout the world, and by their means reinvigorated the exhausted empire. This helped to stabilize peace within the frontiers and

successful relations with foreign powers. . . . Their descendants are with us; and they love Rome as much as we do.¹⁷

In the film Marcus Aurelius says to the assembled leaders:

You do not resemble each other, nor do you wear the same clothes . . . nor worship the same gods. Yet . . . you are the unity which is Rome. . . . Wherever you live, whatever the color of your skin, when peace is achieved, it will bring to all, all, the supreme rights of Roman citizenship. . . . No longer provinces, or colonies, but . . . a family of equal nations. That is what lies ahead.

The speech captures the essence of Gibbon's description of Marcus Aurelius' attitude toward "barbarians" (cf. Gibbon 1: 11) and is a distillation of his second chapter, "Of the Union and internal Prosperity of the Roman Empire, in the Age of the Antonines" (Gibbon 1: 33-68), especially its sections on the "Universal Spirit of Toleration" (34-39) and "Obedience and Union" (50-51). The speech, although fictitious, is in the spirit of the time portrayed, for such integration did lie ahead. It became reality a generation later with the Emperor Caracalla's edict of A.D. 212, the *constitutio Antoniniana*, which granted Roman citizenship to all free non-citizens living in the Roman empire. Marcus Aurelius expresses his confidence in this political unity not only to his listeners but to the film's viewers as well. The mention of different beliefs and religions and particularly the reference to skin color unmistakably point to the ethnic and cultural diversity in modern America. The Roman empire appears as a "multicultural" society, to use a term currently *en vogue* to describe the United States. The ideal which Marcus Aurelius expresses is that of a progressive liberal of the Kennedy era. It is worth noting that the perception of the emperor's affinity to America has a long tradition: Matthew Arnold compared Ralph Waldo Emerson to Marcus Aurelius for his philosophy (Anderson 162) and spoke of Marcus' "stringent practicalness worthy of [Benjamin] Franklin" (Arnold 148).

Marcus Aurelius' words in the film further reflect the struggle for civil rights and encapsulate the idea of the "Great Society" which became pre-

¹⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 11.24, quoted from Grant 243-44. Cf. Cic. *Leg.* 2.2.5 and Aristid. *Or.* 59-61. Nicolet 17-47 and 401-3 (references) and, more briefly, Galinsky 65 outline the process of foreign and barbarian assimilation through the granting of Roman citizenship. Nicolet aptly characterizes "the 'natural *patria*' of which Cicero speaks" and "the national or imperial *patria* embodied in Rome" (46) as "a citizenship at two levels" (47). Cf. also Romilly 80-82, who adduces speeches comparable to Claudius' from D. H. 3.29 (the king of Alba) and Liv. 4.3-5 (Canuleius). Tacitus reshaped Claudius' speech; a bronze tablet found at Lyons preserves a different version. On this see Levick 100-101 and Griffin.

dominant in the Johnson years. (The film was released in the year of the Civil Rights Act.) The philosopher Timonides exclaims, after integration has successfully begun: "What we have done here could be done the whole world over!" But such idealism does not become reality, not in the film nor in contemporary America. The work of the wise emperor, a true father to his country, is undone when he falls victim to a conspiracy.

The film's frontier sequence culminates with the emperor's funeral in a scene of austere but moving pictorial beauty, appropriate for the moment at which the history of Rome turns toward decline. The funeral takes place during a light fall of snow. As Mann rightly said, the scene "had . . . a kind of majesty it wouldn't have had if it had been done on . . . any other kind of day" (Wicking and Pattison 53). Shortly before, he had shown Marcus Aurelius engaged in an interior dialogue on his impending death, a reference to the emperor's *Meditations* and a transposition of one of their major themes into cinematic terms. Taken together, these two scenes even parallel the one in Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* in which an unexpected snowfall follows Marcus Aurelius' discourse on the brevity of life. The subdued funeral scene provides Mann with a stark contrast to the overwhelming splendor of the city of Rome.

III.

An irresponsible Commodus becomes the new emperor. He is incapable of understanding, much less implementing, Marcus Aurelius' vision, but then Commodus takes no interest in the tasks of government. As Gibbon said, Commodus "valued nothing in sovereign power, except the unbounded licence of indulging his sensual appetites" (Gibbon 1: 105). As far as the restrictions of a popular medium allow, we see such a Commodus on the screen. Very skillfully, Anthony Mann presents the ensuing conflict between the shortsighted, cruel, and rigid ways of the past and the new—but ultimately defeated—way of social and political change which is necessary for Rome's survival. He does so by consistently integrating the spectacular requirements of the epic genre into the development of the film's real subject. To put it differently, he translates a clash of ideas into visual terms which unobtrusively reinforce his theme. Mann had prepared the way for this in the long opening section on the border, but he shifts gears when he moves the story to the capital.

The film contains the most sophisticated recreation of imperial Roman architecture ever presented on the screen. Mann shows us the city at the height of its elegance and the vast extent which signals its power. That "most renowned forum of ancient dominion," to quote Ammianus, was reconstructed

for the film on a scale surpassing anything ever seen before or since. The huge outdoor set, which still holds the record of being the largest ever built, is a detailed recreation of the heart of the eternal city. It is, in fact, such an accurate and impressive reconstruction that the following year Moses Hadas and the editors of Time-Life Books included a photograph of it in *Imperial Rome*, a volume in the series *Great Ages of Man*.¹⁸

Our first view of Rome occurs during Commodus' triumphal procession to the temple of Capitoline Jupiter. The film combines Commodus' entry into Rome with the triumph held shortly afterwards (Hdn. 1.7.6; Hist. Aug. *Comm.* 3.6). The Forum will also witness the film's climax, the death of Commodus and the public bidding for the vacant throne. The Forum thus represents the majesty of the empire just before and at its turning point from stability to decline. By contrast, the interior sets emphasize the riches and luxury which come with power. As it was in antiquity, such luxury is usually the outward manifestation of personal decadence and political corruption. What William McDonald has said about the Domus Augustana, Domitian's palace, well describes the political function of imperial architecture and applies even to that seen in the film: the palace was "an architectural incarnation of majesty. The interiors were designed for the same purpose . . . to create a tangible rhetoric of power, a panegyric in architecture."¹⁹ But the same architecture also signals the absolutism of power which, in the words of Frank Brown, "expresses its moral order by an environment which cannot be disobeyed."²⁰

Anthony Mann employs the visual splendor on the screen to comment on the character of Commodus. We may bear in mind Gibbon's memorable phrase: "Commodus lay, dissolved in luxury," in his palace (Gibbon 1: 104). The sumptuous surroundings serve to heighten our sense of his callousness, as in a scene in which Commodus for the first time reveals his incipient megalomania. Dressed in gilded robes, he performs, before his councillors, a series of dance steps on the map of Italy which decorates the floor. But the interiors also reveal the sheer beauty of imperial architecture. The warm colors of the palace are in deliberate contrast to the garish and often tasteless decor usually

¹⁸ Hadas 72-73. Solomon 55-58 rightly emphasizes the authenticity of the film's sets, both interiors and exteriors. Vance 1-42 ("History's Largest Page") discusses the impact of the Forum Romanum on America's imagination.

¹⁹ McDonald 71. Cf. McDonald 167 on vaulted architecture as symbol of a unified empire. McDonald 179-83 ("Imperial Civilization and Architecture") gives an excellent summary of the meaning of imperial architecture and of its function as "a mimesis of the state" (181). On the political implications of visual arts during the developing imperial age, see Zanker.

²⁰ Brown 114. A brief survey on ancient architecture and power at Bammer 122-31 and 158-59 (references).

seen in Hollywood's Roman films.²¹ The film's one false note regarding interior decoration is struck by palatial wall paintings modeled on the third-century A.D. floor mosaics from the *exedrae* of the central room in the Baths of Caracalla, which depict athletes and trainers or referees. (Parts of these mosaics are now on display in the Museo Gregorio Profano in the Vatican.) Although slightly anachronistic and put in the wrong place, they nevertheless furnish an effective visual characterization of an emperor as besotted with athletics and games as Commodus was.

Mann contrasts imperial luxury and decadence with two fundamental Roman qualities, *simplicitas* and *virtus*, which he presents both visually and verbally. He shows us a senate debate in which the film's theme becomes most explicit. Both the barrenness of the senate hall, indicated by the absence of all luxury except for a marble floor, and the prominence accorded the statue of the Capitoline she-wolf, its only other decoration, symbolize the traditional Roman way. No doubt the imperial senate of the late second century never met in the modest surroundings we see on the screen, and no doubt the number of senators in the film is far too small to accord with historical fact, but these very inaccuracies well serve Mann's approach to his subject: he expresses visually and thus renders immediately intelligible even to audiences unfamiliar with Roman history what otherwise might have remained too abstract or alien to them. An empty boast about the power of Rome and the extent of its empire from one of Commodus' sycophants elicits a response from an old senator who represents *auctoritas* and reason. He embodies the ideal of a true Roman, a *vir vere Romanus*; as such, he remains unnamed. He has something to say not only to the assembly but also to Americans regarding their own history and their contemporary situation:

How does an empire die? Does it collapse in one terrible moment? No, no, but there comes a time when its people no longer believe in it. Then, then does an empire begin to die. . . . During all those years our empire grew, changed. The law of life is: grow or die. . . . Let the world know that Rome will not die. 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, let the heart of the empire grow with us. Honorable Fathers, we have changed the world—can we not change ourselves?

²¹ Cf. McDonald 174 on interior colors and 178 on the colors and the pools of Domitian's palace. Solomon 59 reproduces a valuable publicity still (in black and white), which shows the palace's intricate decorations to good effect.

The old senator is portrayed by Finlay Currie, a distinguished Scottish actor well into his eighties at this time. (Fraser 7 pays homage to him.) Currie often appeared in the part of an authority figure. In *Quo Vadis*, for instance, he had played St. Peter; in the 1959 *Ben-Hur* he was Balthasar. To cast him as the personification of all that is good and great about Rome was thus an appropriate choice. Gibbon's description of Pertinax' character (Gibbon 1: 109-10) may have influenced Mann and his screenwriters in their conception and presentation of this fictional aristocrat. The senator's reference to "the law of life" takes up the ancient metaphor of the human body for the body of the state.²² The speech receives added importance because this scene is the senator's only appearance in the entire film.

The statue of the she-wolf visually reinforces what he represents. It symbolizes the traditional virtues of the Roman republic, not the power of empire. A small statue of the she-wolf had served the same function in Joseph Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1951), where it decorated the garden of Brutus' house. The statue's placement in the Roman senate points to the fact that senatorial government and not absolute monarchy had enabled Rome to rise and endure. The decline from such standards appears in a second scene in the same hall, when an assembly so craven as to remind us of Tacitus' earlier accounts of senatorial servility abases itself to Commodus in abject flattery.²³ Significantly, the old senator is not present in this later scene. Ironically, it is old men like Marcus Aurelius and this senator who stand for the possibility of a new Rome while a young man, Commodus, represents the old Rome of military conquest and political despotism. Commodus at one point threatens to destroy his own people, thus proving himself the worst kind of tyrant. (In the *Historia Augusta* he is said to have ordered the spectators in the amphitheater killed; *Comm.* 15.6.) The film here carries a Neronian overtone because Commodus wants to squeeze more taxes out of the impoverished nations in order to finance games and an expensive building program at Rome. The visual splendor of Rome, immaculately beautiful as it already is, only serves to reveal his megalomania and madness. (As ancient rumor had it, Commodus, like Nero, ordered Rome burnt.²⁴)

The contemporary theme of two superpowers on the brink of a conflict threatening to destroy Western civilization surfaces in the film's last quarter.

²² Discussed by Romilly 12-14; she adds that the pattern is Roman, not Greek.

²³ Cf. Gibbon 1: 112. The *Historia Augusta*, however, mentions the possibility that the senators were secretly mocking Commodus (*Hist. Aug. Comm.* 8.9).

²⁴ *Hist. Aug. Comm.* 15.7, referring to the fire of Rome in A.D. 192. According to Cassius Dio 72.24, Commodus was not responsible.

The greatest menace to the Roman empire is posed by that of the Persians. They have been brought into the intra-Roman conflict through a political alliance engineered by treachery. The Persians do not belong to the family of nations into which Marcus Aurelius wants the Roman empire to turn, as he had specifically mentioned in his speech. They are a stand-in for the modern Soviets, and in this regard the film reveals the political climate of the Cold War. Historically, it was the Parthians, not the Persians, who threatened Rome's Eastern frontier in the age of the Antonines, and the *Historia Augusta* tells us that Marcus Aurelius even ratified peace with the kings and satraps of Persia (Hist. Aug. *M. Anton.* 26.1). The substitution of Persia for Parthia in the film could perhaps be explained by the fact that Parthians are wholly unknown to the general public today, particularly to cinema audiences, and by the similarity of the two names. The Persians may be regarded as quite suitable to assume the part of the Western world's worst enemy, just as Huns or Mongols were to do later on, and as the Persians had actually done in the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C. The Persians in Mann's film appear only as a mass of warriors; there are no individuals to be distinguished among them, not even generals. They are menacing exotic barbarians, anonymous, incomprehensible, and alien.

This is also the likely reason why the film's only large-scale battle, that between Romans and Persians, is curiously uninvolved. Usually, a battle sequence which comes toward a long historical film's end is its epic set piece, meant to excite viewers and to arouse their martial or vicariously patriotic sense (at least the male viewers'). While the Persian battle does have heroic action and daring stunts, the enemy's anonymity prevents audience involvement. Moreover, for once Mann's visual style works against his intention. Mann and Yakima Canutt, the film's second-unit director, staged the battle in the manner of the American action genre *par excellence*, the Western. We see cavalry clashing in a rocky desert, horses falling, spears and arrows flying through the air, and Western stunts: "Some of the men on the rocks leaped down onto the riders, knocking them from their horses" (Canutt 206). All this, however, throws into greater relief the very quality of the rest of the film, where such problems do not occur.²⁵

²⁵ I discuss the stylistic influence of the Westerns Mann had directed in the 1950s on his epic films at Winkler 1993: 105-7. On classical features in the Western cf. Winkler 1985. Yakima Canutt had been a rodeo champion and stunt man before becoming second-unit director. He drove a chariot in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935), directed the race in the remake of *Ben-Hur*, and worked on *Helen of Troy* (1955) and *Spartacus*. He gives a brief account of staging the Persian battle at Canutt 205-6.

The film's climax and epilogue restate its main theme. After the death of Commodus at the hands of Livius, the victor has free access to the throne. By cinematic convention, it is rightly his. But Livius walks away from it and from all further involvement in the public and even military life of Rome. This is necessary not only because history demands it—after all, there was no Emperor Livius—but even more so because Mann's artistic perspective on his subject demands it to make his point. Livius would no longer be true to himself if he gave in to the lure of power. The implication is that he might become a second Commodus. Instead, he preserves his moral character intact. At the same time, he preserves his stature as an epic cinematic hero. As a result of his rejection of imperial power, the empire is auctioned off to the highest bidder. This scene is modeled on the accession of Didius Julianus after the murder of Pertinax in A.D. 193 and represents another instance of Gibbon's influence (cf. Gibbon 1: 119-21, with references to ancient sources). Poignantly, Mann even withholds from us the outcome of the bidding to indicate that it no longer matters who is at the helm of Rome. The age of someone like Marcus Aurelius is irrevocably past. Now anybody will make a bad emperor; anybody will do; any rule will be corrupt and incompetent. More likely than not, it will end in violence shortly after it begins.

Over the final shots of the Forum in obvious confusion the narrator tells us: "This was the beginning of the fall of the Roman empire. A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within." The words echo Gibbon's verdict that, with the establishment of the imperial system of government, "the enemies of Rome were in her bosom; the tyrants, and the soldiers" (Gibbon 1: 216). Shortly before, Anthony Mann has shown us the Roman people, bribed by Commodus' dole, celebrating their riches. They are oblivious of their society's chaotic state. Some of them wear large masks and walk on stilts, an image which creates a medieval-looking carnival atmosphere.²⁶ The underlying thought is that of the proverbial dance on the volcano. The scene's implications are clear: it illustrates Mann's intention to relate the fate of Rome "to any society." The narrator echoes ancient Roman historians' perspectives on the decline and fall of states as well. The film is thus faithful to the Roman spirit, which it has resurrected before our eyes. That

²⁶ In ancient Rome, stilts appear among childrens' games and on the comic stage; on this Marquardt 837-38. On the importance of the masks in lower-class Roman entertainments for the later history of theater see Bieber 254, who links the masks of Bucco and Manducus to German and British puppet theater (Kasperle, Punch). It is possible, although not likely, that the filmmakers intended the masks on the screen to refer to this source. Illustrations of Manducus masks at Bieber 248 figs. 821-22.

spirit's validity now takes on additional modernity if we consider the history of recent years.

Thus *The Fall of the Roman Empire* reaches well beyond its place in film history as the most accomplished of all ancient epic films or as a cultural icon of its time. Ironically, the film itself brought about the fall of an empire. Although one of the highest-earning films of 1964, it could not recoup its immense costs of over 20 million dollars and was the last grand-scale production by Samuel Bronston. Coming after the *Cleopatra* debacle of 1963, it was also Hollywood's last Roman epic.

IV.

I began this paper with some quotations about the emotional effect which ancient Rome and, later, its ruins had on those who saw them. I then tried to show that the cinema can, in a manner of speaking, rebuild these ruins. I close by quoting from one more literary work describing the impact of the ruins on the imagination, and I ask readers to draw the analogy to cinema in their own minds. The quotation is from Mme. de Staël's autobiographical novel *Corinne; or, Italy* (1807). The main characters, Corinne and Oswald, are looking down on the Roman ruins:

Oswald could not weary of feasting his gaze from the elevated point to which Corinne had led him. The study of history can never act on us like the sight of that scene itself. The eye reigns all powerfully over the soul. He now believed in the old Romans, as if he had lived amongst them. Mental recollections are acquired by reading; those of imagination are born of more immediate impressions, such as give life to thought and seem to render us the witnesses of what we learn. . . . Celebrated countries of all kinds, even when despoiled of their great men and great works, exert a power over the imagination. That which would once have attracted the eye exists no more, but the charm of memory still survives.²⁷

Do not the cinema's moving images exert a power over our imagination, attract our eye, and charm our memory? Is it not time for classical scholars and historians to claim film study as part of their own field, at least as far as films are concerned which depict antiquity or which have recourse to classical topoi, genres, and formulae? If nothing else does, perhaps the pronouncement about ancient Rome by Fred Niblo, director of the silent *Ben-Hur*, will provide

²⁷ Madame de Staël, *Corinne; or, Italy*, tr. Isabel Hill (London 1838); quoted from Moatti 170 and 172.

an incentive. Referring to the set for his film's chariot race, which MGM had built outside Rome, he once said: "When archaeologists unearth Rome in years to come and chance upon the ruins of this great set, they will say, 'Ah, how great was the civilization of those days.'"²⁸

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²⁸ *Motion Picture Magazine* (April, 1926: 98); quoted from Brownlow 404-5. Ironically, the set was not used for the finished film and was later torn down; a new one was built outside Los Angeles when the production had moved back to the U.S.

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