

Leave it to Caesar: Gender, Antiquity, and Cold War Cinema

Keegan Oldham

Appalachian State University

HIS 4100 - History, Memory, and Popular Culture

Dr. Stone

May 2, 2025

Leave it to Caesar: Gender, Antiquity, and Cold War Cinema

It's the end of a decade and two political leaders are standing face to face at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. The American house that is on display is going for \$14,000, an affordable price for the average American. Vice President Richard Nixon stands with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and gestures towards the exhibition: "The American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques."¹ The home is filled with modern appliances and technology to make the daily lives of housewives easier. Setting aside ideas of nuclear powerhouses and the arms race, Nixon argues that capitalism is superior to communism by pointing towards the advancement of consumer goods. Khrushchev disagrees, saying that citizens in Russia don't have to pay for houses. The argument over the merits of television, washing machines, and electric ranges would become one of the most noted verbal sparring matches of the century. The Soviets may be equal in terms of bombs and tanks, but America had the advantage of modern appliances and gender divisions; capitalism simply made life easier. The home was the seat of warmth and security against the forces of alienation and corruption.² This debate demonstrated that the Cold War had moved into a new phase, one that was not characterized by military prowess or conflict between two nations, but instead by cultural ideas to win over people of the world. If the first half of the Cold War was an arms race, the second was an ideological race; who could win over the most people and finally declare themselves better than their opponent.

Historiography

History-based movies and television shows have saturated the entertainment industry. History has become readily available through television channels such as the History Channel

¹ Richard Nixon, "The Kitchen Debate," transcript of speech delivered at Sokolniki Park, Moscow, July 24, 1959.

² Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 26.

and the Public Broadcasting System as well as movie channels like American Movie Classics and the Turner Classic Movies Channel. In recent years, historians have examined the questions about the challenges of incorporating the study of history and the study of film. Garth Jowett's book *Movies as Mass Communication* points out that film studies in universities saw an unexpected boom in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of the invention of the CinemaScope.³ Pierre Sorlin also points this out in his 1980 book *The Film in History: Restaging the Past*, a work that points towards a new analytical framework for the historical film. Sorlin argues that historical films should be analyzed through the period in which they were created, a way of comprehending how people of that time made sense of their history and past.⁴ The understanding is that historical films are not a direct representation of reality and instead are constructed in a way to make a recognition of the past through the lens of the time in which it was created.⁵ Sorlin's arguments on the approach in which historians need to look at films have been echoed by Robert Rosenstone almost fifteen years later.

In a 1995 article "The Historical Film as Real History," Rosenstone argues that most historians take two broad approaches to historical film: an implicit and explicit approach. The explicit approach focuses on finding history in film and asserts that films are a reflection of the social and political concerns of the era; the implicit approach sees film as a book transferred onto the screen and is therefore subjected to the same judgments.⁶ In this article, Rosenstone provides characteristics that historical films have and are listed as follows: history as a story set in the framework of moral progress; history as a story of individuals; history as a close, uncontested story; history as emotional, personal and dramatic; history as a process; and history as a period

³ Garth Jowett, *Movies as Mass Communication*, edited by James M. Linton, The Sage Commtext Series 4 (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1980), 13.

⁴ Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, 32.

⁶ Robert Rosenstone, "The Historical Film as Real History," *Film-Historica* 5, no. 1 (1995): 5-6.

look.⁷ Rosenstone argues in this work that historians should explore the contemporary understandings of the past instead of placing importance on historical accuracy.⁸

Recent authors such as Sian Barber in her work *Using Film as a Source*, mention the work that both Pierre and Rosenstone have done and focus on the fact that historical films are like any other film in the sense that they are stories told to audiences. Barber acknowledges the premise that films are created with narratives in mind and must be entertaining for audiences.⁹ Other authors such as Elena Theodorakopoulos stress the distinction between narrative and spectacle in historical films. Theodorakopoulos draws on and expands many of Rosenstone's previously mentioned findings: the high frequency of the protagonist being the outsider in historical dramas, the connection to advanced technology, and the distinction between the story that is told on screen and the way in which that story is created.¹⁰ Continued debate around how film is used to portray history and how historians analyze such films will continue for decades, though there are a few key points to keep in mind: the historical film is not a true reality but a depiction of what could be, the characteristics of historical film as presented by Rosenstone, and the messages and ideas that films portray.

Even more ambiguous is the depiction of Rome within film. Many authors have written about the depiction of Rome with varying contexts. Maria Wyke's 1997 work *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* has a chapter dedicated to the different depictions of Rome throughout both American and Italian history. Wyke traces the use of Rome to early Italian films during the 1930s and the main purpose of such was to justify the fascist aspirations of the

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Sian Barber, *Using Film as a Source* (Manchester: Manchester United Press, 2015), 9.

¹⁰ Elena Theodorakopoulos, *Ancient Rome at the Cinema: Story and Spectacle in Hollywood and Rome* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2010), 19-26.

country at the time.¹¹ This soon trickled down to the American film industry where historical films of Rome could offer “invented traditions” to the American public; the idea that the history of the country went farther back than they knew to establish group cohesion and the legitimacy of the institutions, politics, and social relations.¹² Other authors such as William Fitzgerald highlighted the “us versus them” structure in many Roman historical films which complements the real-world struggle of Cold War America. In doing so, Fitzgerald also brought to light the ambiguities within American culture itself as well.¹³ Fitzgerald focuses on the distinction between the public and private life and how many individuals turn towards the family instead of the state for a sense of comfort and safety.¹⁴ Wyke, in collaboration with Sandra Joshel and Margaret Malamud in the introduction to *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* expands on the interpretive framework of how Rome is portrayed. The main focus of many Roman films is the oppressive nature of tyranny and an invitation to the audience to identify with the victims of the empire.¹⁵ Other common themes that have been pointed out by a myriad of authors include the distinction between Old War and New World (as seen in the casting of American and English actors) and the Roman/Christian dichotomy that is seen in many of the romances associated with Roman historical films.¹⁶

The effects of the Cold War are still present in everyday American life. The Red Scare that most are familiar with occurred as a product of World War II and the rise of the Soviet

¹¹ Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 22; Martin W. Winkler, “The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945,” in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 51.

¹² Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 14.

¹³ William Fitzgerald, “Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Move,” in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

¹⁵ Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Maria Wyke, “Introduction,” in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, “Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities,” 34-35; Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 28.

Union in Eastern Europe.¹⁷ Having been “officially declared” by President Harry Truman on March 12, 1947, in the Truman Doctrine, the Cold War was a decades-long political battle between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this speech, President Truman expresses that it is the “policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”¹⁸ The doctrine would guide U.S. foreign policy for the next forty years; this rhetoric and its effects could also be seen on the homefront. The ideology of containment would spread throughout the world, but also into the home.

In her 1986 work *Private Lives: Men and Women of the Fifties*, Benita Eisler follows the lives of individuals as they came of age in the mid-century and the cultural navigation that they had to go through. The book explores how these individuals grew up following the effects of the Great Depression and World War II and then the social norms of consumerism, the push towards collectivism, and the pressures of getting engaged and married early on in life. The book tries to offer personal insight into those who might have expected their lives “to resemble [the] ideal of togetherness and some who were forced to pretend they did,” by offering ethnographic insight into the decade.¹⁹ Other authors have taken a more scholarly approach to the decade such as Elaine Tyler May and Stephanie Coontz. Coontz’s work *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* focuses more on the generational myths that we are taught to believe about the mid-century. Coontz presents a critique of the idealized vision of American family life and offers a more complex and holistic view of the family dynamic.²⁰ She argues that

¹⁷ James S. Olsen, *Historical Dictionary of the 1950s* (CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 239.

¹⁸ President Truman's Message to Congress; March 12, 1947; Document 171; 80th Congress, 1st Session; Records of the United States House of Representatives; Record Group 233; National Archives.

¹⁹ Benita Eisler, *Private Lives: Men and Women in the Fifties* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1986), 7.

²⁰ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 40.

shifting political and cultural dynamics dramatically changed family structures and unveiled the inadequacies and restraints of the nuclear family model.²¹

Elaine Tyler May's book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* draws parallels between the foreign policy of containment and the "containment" of domestic values in the United States.²² May writes that "the emergency situation ultimately encouraged women to keep their sights set on the home, and men to reclaim their status as the primary breadwinners and heads of households."²³ While this isn't a new argument, May does expand on the theme by diving into women's education and creators of popular culture which contributed towards a domestic ideology. Utilizing the work of those above, a conclusion can be drawn that during a period of heightened nationalism, bellicose religiosity, and pervasive anxiety over gender, morality, and the family, the Roman historical films of the mid-century, an often popular cluster of films, served as a cultural mirror and reinforced ideas of female domesticity as an "American way of life" that echoed with the era's Cold War fears.

Media Context

Movies from the fifties influenced several different things: how to dress for different occasions, how far to go when on a date, what to think about, what was right and wrong, and what was good and bad.²⁴ The most basic components of movie production were instead used to subtly mean something else in order to persuade audiences without them knowing. The movies of the fifties were some of the most heavily hit with censorship because of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). Formed in the late 1940s, HUAC quickly gained power as it investigated all persons suspected of communist affiliations or leanings. This soon spread from

²¹ Ibid., 57-66.

²² May, *Homeward Bound*, 11.

²³ Ibid., 59.

²⁴ Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 2.

the political sphere to the film industry and academic world which compromised the integrity of many directors, producers, and scholars of all kinds. For the film industry specifically, every movie that was produced, no matter the content or context, was made with the overlying fear of HUAC, which dictated “who worked and who didn’t, which subjects were appropriate and which weren’t, how plots could be resolved and how they couldn’t.”²⁵ These beliefs held so much agency that directors, producers, and writers could be blacklisted from the industry for simply refusing to testify to the committee – as evinced by the fate of the Hollywood Ten. The act of simply expressing the First Amendment and speaking freely was seen as a forfeit to Moscow.²⁶

The witch-hunt in the industry resulted in many of the messages and themes being viewed from a standpoint of American greatness so that the workers would not be charged. Peter Biskind attributes this to the Red Menace Theory, the idea that the fear of communism was so potent that had it not existed already at the beginning of the mid-century, American politicians would have invented it. The movies of Hollywood were the ones to invent this fear of communism, though it was a disguise for the domestic nature of the U.S. at the time.²⁷ The oppositions portrayed in the films were heavily influenced by the Manichean Us/Theme thought process which Biskind points out in science fiction movies at the time, though the same can be said about the historical film.²⁸ Rosenstone has made the case that historical films are supposed to leave audiences with a moral message; with the work of Biskind and Rosenstone, it can be assumed that, through the lens of Cold War anxiety, Roman historical films were a way for Hollywood to try and shift the cultural focus from domestic issues to the ideological battle between the United States and the USSR.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Kenneth M. Cameron, *America on Film: Hollywood and American History* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 99.

²⁷ Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, 111.

²⁸ Ibid., 111.

The American Woman

The America of the late 1950s was characterized by self-service, automation, and technology.²⁹ The idea of togetherness was pertinent in the eyes of citizens; the suburban lifestyle was a coping mechanism for the fears of nuclear fallout as well as infiltration, a dystopian landscape. The home and family were utopian enough for everyone.³⁰ The home was where gendered roles became apparent and soon bled out into mainstream culture. Movies were a way for families to get out and enjoy life, but it is what these movies teach about social expectations during this period. The Roman historical films and other biblical epics were popular mediums for pushing these messages.

Cleopatra (1963) opens with Julius Caesar (Rex Harrison) surveying the carnage of defeated legions under the command of Pompey the Great. Caesar knows that Pompey has escaped to Egypt, in hopes of establishing political ties with Pharaoh Ptolemy XIII and his sister Cleopatra VII (Elizabeth Taylor); Caesar follows and arrives at a port in Alexandria where he is then met with Ptolemy XIII and the news that Cleopatra has been cast into the desert. Caesar takes up residence in the palace where a “rug merchant” has arrived with a gift from Cleopatra; Caesar accepts and cuts the bindings on the rug and out rolls Cleopatra. This meeting was also described in Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, in which he would match famous Roman and Greek leaders together for a moral battle. The two have verbal quips throughout the first half of the movie, where they fall in love and Cleopatra has a son of Caesar who lived for almost two decades. The second half of the movie follows Marc Antony (Richard Burton) in the wake of Caesar’s assassination and the ascension of Octavian Augustus. Antony finds himself enthralled with the Egyptian queen, going so far as to forego his duties as a Roman senator in order to

²⁹ Eisler, *Private Lives*, 5.

³⁰ Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, 115.

spend all of his time with her. With his connection to Rome dwindling, Octavian leads a military campaign against Antony and his “Egyptian whore” to which the lovers die in each other's arms at the end of the movie.

Before the 1963 notorious movie, there were only a few historical films that were female-focused; even worse there are few contemporary Egyptian sources that reference Cleopatra, so scholars must rely on the Roman texts that portray an obvious bias against the queen. Modern depictions of the queen often focus on her appearance and the ways in which she used that to her advantage to gain power. The film is perhaps the most iconic depiction of Cleopatra, followed closely by Cecil DeMille’s in the 1930s. Elizabeth Taylor breathes life into Mankiewicz’s vision of Cleopatra, drawing from the femme-fatale personality that was extremely popular at the time. The rise of the femme-fatale personality and the genre of *film noir* focused on women’s sexuality at the center of their identity; the “independent heroine” of the 1940s was no longer needed and instead, the powerful seductress took form.³¹ In the movie, Roman generals warn Julius Caesar that she has been known to “use torture, poison...and even her own sexual talents, which are said to be considerable” to achieve a desired outcome.³² Because of these trends, attempts were made to equate American women with the “good” women of the films – ones who were not after power or lustful as these were considered morally bad attributes. Women who were after power or were the villains in some way were morally corrupt and therefore un-American in nature.³³

This dichotomy of female representation can be seen in many Cold War-era propaganda tactics. Newspapers at the time would suggest that because Soviet women worked and were

³¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 62.

³² *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph Manikiewicz, released in 1963 (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Studios, 2021), DVD.

³³ Joshel, Malamud, and Wyke, “Introduction,” 16.

involved in politics they were no longer feminine, whereas American women did not have to be hard working nor “busy themselves with the affairs of men, such as politics.”³⁴ This real-world distinction between the “good” American women and the “bad” Soviet women materialized in the subtle messaging of Hollywood films. Cleopatra embodies all of the un-American qualities which make her a “bad” woman. She is directly involved with politics, being a queen of Egypt, which has already been an established moral blight on women. She is also abrasive and intense in her ability to transfix and control two powerful generals. Upon their first meeting, Cleopatra quips with Caesar about how “Roman greatness [is] built upon Egyptian riches.”³⁵ For Cleopatra, and Egypt for that matter, their riches lie in the soil. Though the cash crop of Egypt today is cotton or potatoes, in ancient times it was grain.³⁶ Maritime archaeological evidence can show that trade has been conducted between the two empires since the early first century BC in which sea trade was used for grain. As the republic was expanding due to Caesar’s invasions of Gaul, more land was being placed under the rule of Romans so trade from outside sources was required for food, slaves, and materials in order for the republic to survive.³⁷

Cleopatra’s explicit hold over the Roman Republic also extends to a hold over both Caesar and Antony throughout the movie. At the beginning of the film when Caesar is spending his first night in the palace at Alexandria, he is visited by a rug merchant that has been sent by Cleopatra. The dialogue that follows is suggestive in nature, with the rug merchant telling Caesar that the rug is of a “delicate weave” to which Caesar responds that he “can tell more about the quality of merchandise by examining the back side first.”³⁸ The suggestive banter is then further accentuated by Taylor’s posing when she is rolled out of the rug, on display for the great Caesar.

³⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, 22.

³⁵ *Cleopatra*.

³⁶ Lionel Casson, “Trade in the Ancient World,” *Scientific American* 191, no. 5 (1954): 98.

³⁷ Polybius, “Histories” 9.44, translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh, *Perseus Digital Library*.

³⁸ *Cleopatra*.

Plutarch writes about this encounter in his *Parallel Lives* and writes that Caesar was “overcome by the charm of her society” and became immediately infatuated with the queen.³⁹ Though movies such as this like to position Cleopatra’s beauty as her main focal point, ancient sources tell us that it was her charisma and connection to people that captured the hearts of Caesar and Antony. Plutarch above writes that it was Cleopatra’s dedication to her people that moved Caesar. The focus on using her sexuality to control and manipulate the men around her further implies that Cleopatra is not abiding by the American moral code of the mid-century.

Additionally, following the independent nature of wartime women, fears of female sexuality started to rise with the association that physically attractive women are aggressive.⁴⁰ Elaine Tyler May points towards the depictions of women on fighter planes for this: the laid-back and scantily clad women are connected to the powerful and dangerous nature of the warplanes.⁴¹

Cleopatra in the film showcases her power by holding parades and lavish outings in both Egypt and Rome. On her first visit to Rome, she is lifted on a golden throne in the shape of a sphinx with Caesarion by her side as dancers and acrobats are ahead of her. The obvious display of wealth, power, and influence is enough to have the Roman people of the forum bow to her as she is carried through the street. While the citizens of Rome might have been bewitched by Cleopatra, Roman senate members are not; in a letter to a friend, Cicero writes about potential harm to Cleopatra and “that Caesar of hers” in reference to Caesarion.⁴² Many did not believe that Caesarion was Julius Caesar's child; he himself said that it was not. However, he allowed Cleopatra to use his name because the two nations were intricately tied together and in constant relation which would require political happiness. This hold of power, both in the public sphere

³⁹ Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, edited by Charles W. Elliot (New York: The Collier Press, 1909), 316.

⁴⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 68.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴² Cicero, *Letters to Atticus, Volume IV.*, edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library 491 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 207.

and the private, is the determining factor in what makes a good or bad American woman.

Deviations from the appropriate sexual and familial behaviors, as seen in Cleopatra's portrayal, could lead to social disorder and national security risks.⁴³

The fifties are often known as the dark ages of sexual ideology, often the connection between sexual inadequacy and a threat to the social order is used to highlight this.⁴⁴ Men and women were strictly confined to their respective gender norms when it came to sexual activity and were formed into stereotypic behaviors. While this is typically confined to the home or the private space, failure in this area was seen as a public affair.⁴⁵ By taking on multiple lovers, Cleopatra is being equated to sexual inadequacy and depravity which many officials believed was in direct connection with communism.⁴⁶

Women who were akin to Cleopatra were deemed dangerous to society, as they could distract and distance men from their jobs and families. Even though rates of divorce were lower in the mid-century, studies have found that those who got a divorce did so because of marital unhappiness.⁴⁷ The stress caused by female domesticity saw a decrease in the sex life of many married couples which would push husbands away from their wives in order to seek a new and bold woman; alternatively, bold women served as an opposition to men because the features that they were being praised for were decidedly masculine traits. Subordination made all the difference between who was "good" and "bad" in the mid-century.⁴⁸ Cleopatra is inevitably a warning that dangerous women can be detrimental to society with the fear that they would emasculate men and no longer hold respect for the home and family. Those who chose to take a

⁴³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 12, 96.

⁴⁴ Eisler, *Private Lives*, 143.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁶ May, *Homeward Bound*, 91.

⁴⁷ Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 62, 75.

⁴⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*, 63.

personal path that did not include the sanctity of marriage or the wonders of parenthood were at risk of being labeled immortal, unpatriotic, and degenerative.⁴⁹

Quo Vadis (1951) offers a counterpart to the dangerous and seductive Cleopatra. The movie follows the journey of Roman General Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor) as he returns to Rome triumphantly from battle in Britain. He is immediately infatuated with the hostage Lygia (Deborah Kerr) who refuses his advances at first but soon succumbs to Marcus's appeal. The two continue with a back-and-forth on Christian faith throughout the movie until eventually, Marcus yields to the faith. Nero, the film's main villain, uses the fire that beset Rome in 64 AD to persecute Christians throughout the empire, endangering the lives of Lygia and Marcus. Nearly martyred, the couple managed to escape Rome and flee south along the Appian Way.

Quo Vadis is one of the most notable Roman historical movies because it follows the basic binary opposition premise that is found in early Roman historical films: a pagan man falls in love with a Christian girl. In addition, it casts heroic Christianity as the antithesis of Roman corruption.⁵⁰ The mid-century saw a rise of organized religion and church membership increased drastically; a 13% rise in the population from 1940 to 1960.⁵¹ The rise of many biblical and Roman historical films could have been a direct response to this rise; the United States saw a culture that was in pursuit of a unified religious morality.⁵² Those dual oppositions that were portrayed – Rome and slaves, Rome and Egypt, even the Republic and Empire – positioned mainstream Americans as revolutionaries because of their massive affiliation with religious identification. Having a “history” on your side was something that had not previously been seen in mass culture.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁰ Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome*, 19

⁵¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 29.

⁵² Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 17.

⁵³ Fitzgerald, “Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities,” 25.

These distinctions are made clear between the two main characters of the film, Marcus and Lygia. Marcus is the physical embodiment of Rome: physically strong, fixated on conquest, and destined to control the world. Like Rome, America was conceived of an ideal republic that was set on expanding as much as possible with many leaders being depicted in Roman wear.⁵⁴ The connections between Rome and America are being laid here to show the transformation that the entire nation can undergo. Lygia, on the other hand, is the guiding hand of righteousness, which is so often seen in traditional epic redemption structures. Lygia's softness was indicative of the real-world woman's role as a psychologist to the returning veteran.⁵⁵ During the war, many magazines would have advice columns that were dedicated to the psychological disruption of veterans and much of the healing process would fall onto the women of the house; the needs of the nation turned towards those returning.⁵⁶ In addition, many magazines would advise women to put family first and equality second, a trend that has been studied by postwar scholars such as Betty Friedan, Joanne Meyerowitz, and Gaye Tuchman. No longer being urged to follow their own desires, women instead were being offered tips on how to keep a husband interested.⁵⁷ Instead of highlighting the beneficial impact of labor forces, political movements, or cultural changes, the media "discredit, isolate, and undercut" women by presenting these issues as distasteful.⁵⁸ Just like with Cleopatra, bold and tough women were not the standard that was being set; softness was required in the home.

Modern religious ideas are also embedded within the film: the idea of "purity" and "piety" being connected to femininity. Marcus makes remarks towards Simon called Peter for being "womanish" in connection with religion, though before long Marcus loses his Roman

⁵⁴ Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 15.

⁵⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 63

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁸ Gaye Tuchman, "Women's Depiction in Mass Media," *Signs* 4, no. 3 (1979): 533.

masculinity and becomes feminine himself for converting. This idea of connecting piety with moral goodness, especially in women, furthers the idea of religion as a patriotic duty. To be godless was to be Communist; the voiceover at the beginning of the film brings to life the tyrannical and irreverent ways of the Romans:

Imperial Rome is the center of the empire...and undisputed master of the world. But with this power inevitably comes corruption...The individual is at the mercy of the state. Murder replaces justice. Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to bondage...That any force on earth can shake the foundations of this pyramid of power and corruption of human misery and slavery, seems inconceivable. But 30 years before this day, a miracle occurred. On a Roman cross in Judea, a man died to make men free, to spread the gospel of love and redemption. Soon that humble cross is destined to replace the proud eagles that now top the victorious Roman standards.⁵⁹

This opening presents the viewer with a clear interpretation of the contemporary battle between the morally righteous America and the atheistic Soviets. The alignment of “American” to “religious” and “pious” fueled these distinctions between those on the homefront and those abroad. Lygia’s attitudes at the beginning of the movie already set her apart from the Romans with one guard remarking that the opinions she holds towards the plight of women in Britain and Gaul are odd “for a woman of Rome.”⁶⁰ At the very beginning, the film places Lygia on the moral high ground and attributes that elevation to her faith. Additionally, when Marcus is trying to get Lygia to come with him on their first meeting, she tells him that he is barbarous and that she does not like that aspect of him. Marcus has been shown as having great power and influence over people and often resorts to violence - in the beginning of the film when a soldier speaks out of turn Marcus commands that the man get ten lashes and to double the lashes for any more complaints about having to wait.⁶¹ The beginning of the movie showcases the basic principles of each side of the ideological war.

⁵⁹ *Quo Vadis*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy, released 1951 (Beverly Hills: Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 2008), DVD.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Lygia is able to make headway with Marcus in her beliefs – the American beliefs – once he witnesses Peter preaching to a congregation in the night. There is something to be said about the fact that it takes a man in some position of power in order for Marcus to start understanding Lygia's beliefs. It is not Lygia herself who is able to break through to Marcus, but instead Peter; such a conflict of deep emotions between two men is common in the toga movie.⁶² Roman men are set up against each other, usually as competitors, enemies, or masters and slaves.⁶³ Marcus and Peter had previously been set up as competitors of each other: when Paul visits the house of Aulus Plautius there is secrecy and hesitation when asked about his occupation. Marcus assumes that he is a merchant at first but when told Paul is a rabbi he is quickly told by Plautius and his wife that he teaches. The heads of household are quick to interrupt and not disclose the actual reason for Paul's visit; this secrecy and high confidentiality is very reminiscent of Cold War fears. The opposition between Marcus and Peter is for different reasons - Marcus wishes to take Lygia by force if necessary and Peter wishes for her to deepen her faith. The need for privacy and for no outside influence to penetrate the home life can be observed in this scene. This idea of isolationism in the home is reminiscent of the mid-century nuclear family; the home was considered the seat of the family and was the key economic unit of the time.⁶⁴ Any shift that was seen on the outside, in the public sphere, did not radically change what was happening inside the home. Once the outside world has been set, the nuclear family can continue on as normal.⁶⁵

After this night, Marcus is confronted with the first aspect of the Christian belief that he had been exposed to previously: thou shall not kill. Marcus acknowledges that there are some Romans dead, though instead of persecuting Ursus as a normal Roman would have, he questions

⁶² Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities," 39.

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁴ Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, 251.

⁶⁵ Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities," 33.

why Ursus didn't kill him as well. Ursus works as a foreshadowing for Marcus: Ursus is a physically strong individual, something that has been commented on in the movie before, though follows the Christian faith and adheres to pro-family values. When Ursus first appears on screen, Marcus asks if he had ever been trained as a gladiator to which Ursus responds that he does not fight. As soon as Ursus brings up any opposition to this he is ridiculed by Marcus and called "half-witted."⁶⁶ Gladiatorial games were common, especially during the reign of Nero. Nero is known to have a scale of grandeur when it comes to entertainment; when he was but a praetor and consul he would hold gladiatorial games that were so inhumane that it would require Emperor Augustus to restrain him from holding another one by an edict.⁶⁷ Gladiatorial games were a way to showcase strength and were a common Roman pastime event; by asking Ursus if he had ever been involved with the games and then demeaning him after he answers no, Marcus is mocking his "un-Romanness." Ursus, though he looks like a Roman, is not based on his beliefs; a shift we see later in Marcus as the movie progresses.

Lygia acts as a driving motivator for the conversion of Marcus, though most of the work she does is not shown. Women have worked as agents of social control after the divide between the public and private spheres, which introduced the "womanly" ideals of refinement and teachings of manners and morals.⁶⁸ The public sphere was seen as male-dominated and masculine, while the private space was feminine and domestic. This reassignment of cultural value to women in the mid-century was soon reformulated as natural and furthered the divide between the two spaces.⁶⁹ Women were the ones to define and confirm the value systems that

⁶⁶ *Quo Vadis*.

⁶⁷ Suetonius, "Nero," in *Lives of the Caesars, Volume II: Claudius. Nero. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Vespasian. Titus, Domitian. Lives of Illustrious Men: Grammarians and Rhetoricians. Poets (Terence. Virgil. Horace. Tibullus. Persius. Lucan). Lives of Pliny the Elder and Passienus Crispus*. Translated by J. C. Rolfe. Loeb Classical Library 38. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 98.

⁶⁸ Leslie J. Miller, "Uneasy Alliance: Women as Agents of Social Control," in *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 12, no. 4 (1987): 346.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 350.

were being embedded in society.⁷⁰ Lygia is an occupant of the private sphere: she is seen mostly in houses or private gatherings and only in the public sphere when she is made to. When told to go to a feast for the emperor, Lygia is confused and angry when she is escorted out of the house of Plautius and made to dress in a revealing way that is not indicative of her character. Because of this shift, motherhood was given a sense of national purpose with the idea that they would raise the future generation on American values and traditions.⁷¹ Lygia's grips on Marcus are seen early on in the movie, as it is shown that Marcus is not afraid to use force when approached with contention. Additionally, his reluctance to continue pursuing Lygia after accepting defeat speaks to the character growth that Lygia has orchestrated. For Lygia, it is this moment when she sees Marcus starting to leave behind the Roman way and accept this new faith.

Lygia embodies the roles American society earmarked for women. Cleopatra showcases the wickedness that women are capable of and how they can break apart families and choose ambition over the home. With Lygia, the idea of domesticity and guidance is made apparent in her soft-spoken words, the plain clothing that she wears, representing simplicity and modesty, and her insistence on converting Marcus (which is made complete when Lygia is about to die and Marcus finally cries out to God). She is able to domesticate the cold-hearted and brash Other. This development also draws back to Fitzgerald's public and private argument. Once Marcus has been converted, even the slightest bit, he already starts to retreat from the Roman public sphere; his presence at the private gathering of the believers is the turning point for this. Marcus soon understands that if there is a future ahead of him, it is with the spread of Christianity that has been identified as family values and not with the forceful nature of Rome.⁷²

⁷⁰ Biskind, *Seeing is Believing*, 267.

⁷¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 98.

⁷² Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities," 33.

After 1951, sword-and-sandal movies started shifting away from heterosexual romance and towards homoerotic undertones between males started to take place. *Spartacus* and *Ben-Hur* serve as examples of these in their respective movies. Because of this shift, not much focus has been given to the women in these films as the centerpiece is decidedly the perceived relationship between Spartacus and Antonius and Ben-Hur and Messala, respectively. Both of the films follow the titular character in a plot for revenge: for Spartacus, it was the desire to be a freeman and revolt against the Roman government; Ben-Hur makes it his mission to seek vengeance on Messala for wrongful imprisonment. The only women that have some agency are the lovers of both characters and then Ben-Hur's mother and sister. The absence of a significant presence of the women in the films coincides with Gaye Tuchman's idea of "symbolic annihilation."⁷³ This understanding of women's underrepresentation in media often links to their real-world lack of power; the characters of Varinia, Tirzah, and Miriam all lose themselves in the grand scheme of the movie, only making appearances that further the character development of the male protagonists. Tirzah and Miriam follow closely with the ideals of women at the time which include taking part in the healing process of veterans – they both ask and indulge in Messala's battle stories.⁷⁴ However, when it is revealed to Ben-Hur that his sister and mother are lepers and live on the outskirts of town later in the movie, they are again being used as a motivation for Ben-Hur to continue with his revenge on Messala. They are a constant thought for Ben-Hur and are only used to further his goal in the film.

Varinia is also only used to further the story of Spartacus. The movie focuses on the slave revolts that served as the start of the Third Servile War in Rome; historically much focus is put on the war and battles themselves and just Spartacus instead of anyone else. Varinia is a created

⁷³ Tuchman, "Women's Depiction in Mass Media," 533.

⁷⁴ *Ben-Hur*, directed by William Wyler, released in 1959 (Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 2021), *Tubi*.

character with an “audience image” in mind. Romance was a popular way to add to the story and by using the audience’s preferred narratives, the relationship between Varinia and Spartacus would have drawn more attention. Varinia’s purpose in the movie is to motivate Spartacus to form a world where there are no slaves; the revelation of her pregnancy is how the story continues. Both of these films adhere to the distinctive separation of space and where women are allowed to be seen. The realm of revenge is a masculine one, where the powers of women are not able to reach unless through severe force.

The depiction of Romaness has shifted throughout the years in accordance with political and social movements and has offered interpretive insights about how topics are viewed in certain eras. For the mid-century, Rome could be equated to Americans with their determination and fierce personality, or it could be in reference to the Soviet Union and their tyrannical actions. Either way, Roman historical films served a purpose in the fifties and sixties to show the dangers of not conforming to society. Women specifically were under a lot of pressure to change their ways – from working in male-dominated fields to being pushed into the household. The distinction between what makes a good or bad American woman lies in how dominating they are in the public or private sphere of life. Women who showcased outward power, influence, or wealth were ultimately deemed as untrustworthy and sensual while those who adhered to the cultural norms were viewed as pure. The rise of religion also helped to cement these beliefs because the fear of being an outcast was stronger than anything. President Eisenhower spoke to this: “Without God, there could be no American form of Government, nor an American way of life.”⁷⁵ The religious attribute helped to fuel fear and division among the citizens, causing a shift towards the private walls of homes and families where people believed they were safe.

⁷⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Remarks Recorded for the "Back-to-God" Program of the American Legion. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

In the debate between Nixon and Khrushchev, a distinction was made: the private life of the family was more important and a defining characteristic for women than the public domain of work or politics. Superiority rested on the idea of the suburbs, modern technology, and distinct gender roles for family members. This is what made America better than the Soviets. These were the movies that showed men and women how to be an American: be pious, be proper, and be patriotic.

Bibliography

- Barber, Sian. "Film and History." *Using Film as a Source*. Manchester University Press, 2015: 8-27.
- Biskind, Peter. *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. Pantheon Books, 1983.
- Cameron, Kenneth M. "1950-59: The First 1950s." *America on Film: Hollywood and American History*. New York: Continuum, 1997.
- Casson, Lionel. "Trade in the Ancient World." *Scientific American* 191, no. 5 (1954): 98–105. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24943685>.
- Cicero. *Letters to Atticus, Volume IV*. Edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey. Loeb Classical Library 491. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Revised and updated edition, 2016 edition. Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Book Group, 2016.
- Cyrino, Monica Silveira. *Big Screen Rome*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Eisler, Benita. *Private Lives: Men and Women of the Fifties*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1986.
- Eisenhower, Dwight D. Remarks Recorded for the "Back-to-God" Program of the American Legion. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-recorded-for-the-back-god-program-the-american-legion>.
- Fitzgerald, William. "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie," in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*. Edited by Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 23-49.
- Joshel, Sandra R., Margaret Malamud, and Maria Wyke. "Introduction." *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*. Edited by Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Jowett, Garth. *Movies as Mass Communication*. Edited by James M. Linton. The Sage Commtext Series v. 4. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1980.
- Kubrick, Stanley, dir. *Spartacus*. 1960; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 2021. *Dailymotion*.
- LeRoy, Mervyn, dir. *Quo Vadis*. 1951; Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 2008. *DVD*.

- Mankiewicz, Joseph L., dir. *Cleopatra*. 1963; Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Studios, 2021. *Dailymotion*.
- May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.
- May, Lary. "Movie Star Politics: The Screen Actors' Guild, Cultural Conversion, and the Hollywood Red Scare," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*. University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958." *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1455-1482.
- Miller, Leslie J. "Uneasy Alliance: Women as Agents of Social Control." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 12, no. 4 (1987): 345-61.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3340942>.
- Nixon, Richard. "The Kitchen Debate." Transcript of speech delivered at Sokolniki Park, Moscow, July 24, 1959. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1959-07-24.pdf>
- Olsen, James S. *Historical Dictionary of the 1950s*. CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Plutarch. *Parallel Lives*. Edited by Charles W. Elliot. New York: The Collier Press, 1909.
- "Antony." *Lives, Volume IX: Demetrius and Antony. Pyrrhus and Gaius Marius*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Loeb Classical Library 101. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920.
- Polybius. "Histories." Translated by Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. *Perseus Digital Library*. Accessed April 13, 2025.
<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0543.tlg001.perseus-eng1:9.44>
- President Truman's Message to Congress. March 12, 1947. Document 171. 80th Congress, 1st Session. Records of the United States House of Representatives. Record Group 233. National Archives.
- Rosenstone, Robert. "The Historical Film as Real History." *Film-Historica* 5, no. 1 (1995): 5-23.
- Suetonius. "Nero." *Lives of the Caesars, Volume II: Claudius. Nero. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Vespasian. Titus, Domitian. Lives of Illustrious Men: Grammarians and Rhetoricians. Poets (Terence. Virgil. Horace. Tibullus. Persius. Lucan). Lives of Pliny the Elder and Passienus Crispus*. Translated by J. C. Rolfe. Loeb Classical Library 38. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914.
- Sorlin, Pierre. "How to Look at an Historical Film." *The Film in History: Restaging the Past*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1980.

Theodorakopoulos, Elena. *Ancient Rome at the Cinema: Story and Spectacle in Hollywood and Rome*. Greece and Rome Live. Bristol Phoenix Press. 2010.

Tuchman, Gaye. "Women's Depiction by the Mass Media." *Signs* 4, no. 3 (1979): 528-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173399>.

White, Hayden. "Historiography and Historiophoty." *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1193–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1873534>.

Winkler, Martin M. "The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945." *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*. Edited by Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 50-76.

Wyke, Maria. *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Wyler, William, dir. *Ben-Hur*. 1959; Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 2021. *Tubi*.