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The Cosmopolitan Epics of 2004: A Case Study

Saverio Giovacchini*

In 2004 Hollywood produced three purportedly blockbuster epic films: Troy, King Arthur and Alexander. Many critics suggested a direct link between the 1950s “sword and sandal” epic and this new crop of movies. Similarities between the two cycles certainly exist but in this essay I want to emphasize a crucial difference between the contemporary, cosmopolitan, epic and the previous, more nation-bound, 1950s cycle. Rather than being in tune with key elements of American foreign policy, the new cycle of “sword and sandal” films offers a somber assessment of American imperial adventures. I shall contend, in fact, that the new crop of epic films had to choose between two generic conventions that are, at present, not compatible. On the one hand, epic films had traditionally been the bearers of the foreign policy vision of the country that produced them. On the other, their inflated budgets made them dependent on an international market. Deeply aware of a globalized and rising opposition to US foreign policy and of the fact that foreign box office now exceeds the domestic take of a blockbuster, it may be no wonder that the makers of these films chose to craft them into citizens of the world.

Keywords: Iraq War, Blockbuster cinema, American Foreign Policy, Anti-Americanism.

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Hollywood cinema has often reproduced the self-conscious American fascination with empires noted by many cultural critics and historians.¹ As is well known, many of the “sword and sandal” epics of the fifties dealt with empires, be it the Roman, Macedonian, or even the Egyptian kind. Closer to the present, the first few years of the 21st century have been a heady time for empire, which has been extensively dealt with both in American cinema and in the other media.²

In 2004, Hollywood produced three purportedly blockbuster epic films about empires: *Troy*, *King Arthur* and *Alexander*. Many critics then suggested a direct link between the 1950s “sword and sandal” epic and this crop of movies. In the aftermath of the box office onslaught of *Gladiator*, *New York Times*’s Herbert Muschamp wrote that the *Gladiator* kind of films are a throwback to the Eisenhower age of Normalcy of the 1950s.³ When *Troy* came out, *Variety* noted that the film shared “the same pros and cons as a standard-issue historical spectacle of the 50s: great production values, spectacular battles and some fine actors in grand roles on the one hand; hokey dialogue and insipid romance and dull interstitial downtime between set pieces on the other.”⁴

Similarities between the two cycles abound. Like the previous “sword and sandal” cycle, the early 21st century one was made of blockbusters commanding a vast array of resources and enormous budgets, all above the \$100 million mark. The visual exhibitionism of the former cycle was meant to sway spectators away from their TV, just like the grandiosity of the sets of the latter cycle was meant to remind viewers of the advantages of taking in a film in a movie theater rather than in front of a TV or a computer screen. Like their 1950s predecessors, these films were also quite cavalier

1 Gore Vidal, *Screening History*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. 58. On classic Rome and American political culture see, among the many examples, Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, New York, Norton, 1969. On Rome and American cinema see especially Derek Elley, *The Epic Film*, New York, Routledge, 1984, which is a good introduction to the epic genre. See also Peter Bondanella, *Imperial City, Roman Images in the Modern World*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, Press, 1987 and Donald T. McGuire, Jr., Sandra R. Josbel, and Margaret Malamud (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, University Press, 2001.

2 See Michael Ignatieff “How to Keep Afghanistan from Falling Apart: The Case for a Committed American Imperialism” *New York Times*, 28 July, 2002, p. E1; John Ikenberry, “America’s Imperial Ambition” in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No.5, 2002, p.44-60, Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 2, 2002, p.2-7; Max Boot, “The Case for the American Empire”, *Weekly Standard*, Vol. 7, No. 5, October 15 2001, p.27; Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics*, New York, Vintage, 2003. For a review of this literature see John Bellamy Foster, “The Rediscovery of Imperialism”, *Monthly Review*, Vol. 54, No.6, 2002, p. 1-16.

3 *New York Times*, 30 April 2000, p. 2.

4 *Variety*, 10 May 2004, p. 46.



in reproducing historical knowledge.⁵ Centered on meditations on current political issues, the new epic film was hardly informed by historical *akribéia*. This has long been a tradition of the “sword and sandal” film inside and outside Hollywood.⁶ As Melani McAlister has argued, the 1950s/1960s cycle embodied a distinct foreign policy view, which was in tune with that in vogue in American political circles. This policy condemned the exertions of European imperialism while commenting favorably on the development of America’s own, more informal, imperial project. Thus, Hollywood epics were tied “to the production of a discourse of U.S. power that framed it as inevitably global in its scope, benevolent in its intent, and benign in its effects.”⁷ The 1950s films were “American” insofar as their fairly outspoken criticism of European imperialism, often revealed by the Oxford accent of their villainous Roman bureaucrats, fit well with American foreign vision at the time.⁸

What I want to emphasize here, however, is the relative novelty of the new cycle of “sword and sandal” films that, rather than promoting the American agenda, seemed to offer a somber assessment of it. I name these 2004 films “cosmopolitan epic” because I want to establish a productive tension between the terms “cosmopolitan” and the more nation-bound “Hollywood,” or “American.” The American epic of the fifties embodied a profoundly American vision of foreign affairs. That this vision was not met with universal hostility abroad was probably a testament to the relative success of the policy of the Eisenhower administration *vis a vis* the old and crumbling European empires. Selling these films was, in fact, a way of selling America, a notion that was embodied in Cold War legislation, such as the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act.⁹ The act of selling, however, tends to exclude complete coercion, and expensive blockbuster films, like the epics, needed the kindness of foreign audiences. The international success of these movies is evidence that the “benevolent supremacy” of Eisenhower’s foreign policy, centering on moderate criticism of the stalwarts of European imperialism, an aggressive public relations campaign in the matter of domestic civil rights, financial aid to Western Europe, and a moderate stance during the 1956 Suez crisis, did not resonate negatively outside of the USA.¹⁰ In 1955 Martinique intellectual Aimé Césaire

5 See Martin Winkler, “*Gladiator* and the Tradition of Historical Cinema”, Martin Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 16-30.

6 For an analysis of the Italian and American “sword and sandal” film and the way it “reformulated [the past] in the light of present needs” see Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, London, Routledge, 1997.

7 Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters. Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, p. 46.

8 On this aspect see the famous essay by Michael Wood, “Shake the Superflux” Michael Wood, *America in the Movies, or, “Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind”*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1975, p. 165-188.

9 On the Smith-Mundt act and its cultural mission see Richard Pells, *Not Like Us*, New York, Basic Books, 1997, p. 62.

10 On “benevolent supremacy” see McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 43-83. On Eisenhower and civil rights see Mary Duziak, *Cold War and Civil Rights*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001. On Eisenhower policy during the Suez crisis see Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1981; William Roger Louis and Roger Owen (eds.), *Suez 1956. The Crisis and Its Consequences*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989. For the Italian case, see James Edward Miller “Ambivalent about America: Giorgio La Pira and the Catholic Left in Italy from Nato Ratification to the Vietnam War” *The United States and the European Alliance since 1945*, Oxford, Berg, 1999, p. 127-150. For West Germany see Richard J. Barnett, *The Alliance. America. Europe. Japan. Makers of the Postwar World*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1983. For France see Maurice Vaisse “Post Suez France” in Louis and Owen (eds.), *Suez 1956*, p. 335-346. For the perception of the U.S. in the non-Western world during the Suez Crisis see Ella Shoat, “A Conversation with Rashid Khalidi” in Andrew Ross and Kristin Ross (eds.), *Anti-Americanism*, New York, New York University Press, 2004, p. 110-12. See also Ussama Makdisi, “‘Anti-Americanism’ in the Arab World: An Interpretation of a Brief History”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89, No. 2, 2002, p. 549.



worried that anti-colonialist activists were so “disgusted with Europe” that were turning “toward America and getting used to looking at that country as a possible liberator” -- a myopic choice, Césaire thought, given the neo-imperialist intentions of the USA.¹¹ It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the 1950s epic film cycle ceased to be profitable just when the U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam became increasingly unpopular abroad, as well as domestically.¹²

In 2004, when the cosmopolitan epics came out, outright opposition to American foreign policy was on the rise.¹³ Contrary to the American epics of the 1950s, the new crop of cosmopolitan epic films had to choose between two generic conventions that had become incompatible: the epic movies’ tradition of loyalty to national foreign policies and their necessity to tap foreign markets to offset their enormous budgets. It is a testament to the relative popularity of Eisenhower’s foreign policy that the 1950s epics had been able to meet both goals. Imbued with Eisenhower’s benevolent supremacy, they had made money all over the world. This double strategy was not possible for the cosmopolitan epics. The producers of these films were forced to choose between reflecting highly unpopular foreign policies or making concessions to world popular opinion. It may be no wonder that, deeply aware that foreign box office currently exceeds the domestic take of a blockbuster, the makers of these films chose to craft these epic movies into citizens of the world.¹⁴

Shot in 1999 and released in 2000, *Gladiator* reflects a pre 9.11 world of unquestioned and cocky U.S. military supremacy. In contrast with its model, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (Anthony Mann, 1964), which translated Roman history into a tragic meditation on the fate of European and America empires, *Gladiator* seemed, overall, unconcerned with passing judgment on the Roman, or American, imperial project, preferring instead to personalize evil and good, respectively, in the corrupted emperor, Commodus (Joacquin Phoenix), and the good emperor, Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris). Though *Gladiator*, even more than its predecessor, makes its villain out of the Emperor Commodus, classics professor Peter W. Rose is right in highlighting the celebratory nature of the portrait of the imperial military in Ridley Scott’s film, which has, as its protagonist, the sturdy, honest, imperial general, Maximus (Russel Crowe), and begins with a most campy portrait of the barbaric German tribes’ resistance to Roman legions that are, in turn, depicted as disciplined, civilized, technologically adept, and invincible.¹⁵

The success of Ridley Scott’s film (187 million dollars in the USA and 456 million worldwide) surely contributed to revive the genre. “*Gladiator* came out and worked

11 Aimé Césaire, Discourse on colonialism, trans. Joan Pinkham, with an introduction by Robin D.G. Kelley, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000, p. 76-77.

12 On 1950s epics and Cold War culture see Alan Nadel, “God’s Law and the Widescreen: The Ten Commandments as Cold War ‘Epic’” in Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 90-116.

13 See for example the data in Pew Research Centre “A Year after the Iraqi War” 16 March 2004. <http://people-press.org/report/206/a-year-after-iraq-war> (Accessed 12 January 2010). See also “Anti-Americanism: The view from abroad”, *The Economist*, 17 February 2005, p. 21.

14 Edward Jay Epstein, *The Big Picture. The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood*, New York, Random House, 2005, p. 204-08.

15 See Peter W. Rose “The Politics of *Gladiator*” in Martin M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator. Film and History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, p. 150-72.



really well,” Moritz Borman of Intermedia explains. “Everybody in Hollywood who saw it said ‘whoa! Maybe we should go back and make this kind of pictures.’”¹⁶ In fact, Gore Vidal and Oliver Stone’s script for *Alexander* had lain dormant for almost a decade until the success of Crowe’s vehicle propelled it out of the drawer and into the sands of a gargantuan Moroccan set. By 2003, there were not one but two films being shot on the prodigious life of the great Macedonian *comandante*. As Stone was shooting in Morocco, Baz Luhrman was scouting locations in North Africa and Australia for his own *Alexander the Great*, slated to be produced by Dino De Laurentiis with Leonardo Di Caprio in the lead and a script based on the novel by Valerio Manfredi. On top of it all, Mel Gibson was supposed to shoot a miniseries on the Macedonian golden boy for television.¹⁷

The first of the major epic films to hit American screens, however, was not *Alexander* but *Troy*. The linearity of its story, its conservative sexual economy (Achilles’s lover, Patroclus, is turned into the warrior’s cousin), and the visual exhibitionism of its vast settings make this film the closest of the 2004 cosmopolitan epics to the 1950s predecessors.¹⁸ *Troy* was directed by German filmmaker Wolfgang Petersen and scripted by David Benioff, whose novel, *The 25th Hour*, grounded Spike Lee’s homonymous movie, a sophisticated meditation on the American 9.11. Like Petersen’s preceding works, *Das Boot* (1981), the account of a doomed mission by a German U-Boot in 1941, *In the Line of Fire* (1993), and *The Perfect Storm* (2000), *Troy* is a melancholic meditation on male bonding and the underpinnings of power hierarchies. In *Troy*, like in Petersen’s preceding films, women figure fairly little even though the film, as opposed to the poem, encompasses the entire ten-year span of the war. Like *Das Boot*, *Troy* suggests that war is a power game whose main players have no patience for, or interest in, humanity. “War is young men dying and old men talking,” concludes the wily Odysseus (Sean Bean). Agamemnon (Brian Cox), the “shepherd of peoples” of the *Iliad*, is clearly the villain of the movie, bent on destroying a rival empire and obviously uninterested in the fate of Helen (Diane Kruger), except as a pretext to expand his dominion. Given the man’s depravity, the film has no scruples in sending him to an early death – earlier, that is, than the one allotted Agamemnon by the Greek classics. In Petersen’s *Troy*, as opposed to Homer’s *Iliad*, which famously ends before the fall of the city, Agamemnon is the culprit and must be punished on screen. Thus, he does not die upon his return to Greece but during the burning of the walled city, killed by Briseis (Rose Byrne).

The film builds on its own progenitors that divide sharply into Italian and Hollywood camps. The Trojan War was an appealing reservoir of tales and heroes, which the Italian industry almost immediately began to plunder with Pietro Fosco, a.k.a. Giovanni Pastrone, *La Guerra di Troia* (1910).¹⁹ Generally speaking, Italians tended to

16 Stephen Lavington, *Oliver Stone*, London, Virgin Books LTD., 2004, p. 264.

17 Ibid., 265-66.

18 On the exhibitionism of the epic film see Vivian Sobchak, “Surge and Splendor’ A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic” in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader III*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2003, p. 296-324.

19 See Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Giovanni Pastrone*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1986 and Matteo Sanfilippo, *Historic Park: La Storia e il cinema*, Roma, Elleu, 2004, p. 61-65.



focus on the defenders of the besieged city. The focus on Troy was rich in nationalist implications because the origins of Rome were traditionally traced back to one Trojan warrior, Aeneas, who had fled the fall of the walled citadel and arrived in Italy after the obligatory multi-year *nostos* across the Mediterranean. Thus the Italian story in Pastrone's film, as well as in the later *La Guerra di Troia* by Giorgio Ferroni (*The Wooden Horse of Troy* 1961) and Giorgio Rivalta's *La leggenda di Enea* (*War of the Trojans* 1962), was recast in nationalist terms and re-focused partly, or completely, on Aeneas. In Ferroni's film, for example, Paris and Helen are the culprits and Aeneas is the real hero who will go on defeating all the Greek *Übermenschen* including both Ajax and Achilles. After the collapse of the city, Cassandra foretells Aeneas about his "glorious destiny" where "Troy will live again in the glory of your progeny."²⁰

Having no such ideological and mythological investment in Troy itself, Anglo-Saxon cinema had a more neutral attitude and a story which often equally involved Trojans and Greeks. Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927) recast the story as light comedy²¹ and in 1956 Robert Wise made Paris and Helen into a star struck couple of lovers, caught between the benign capitalism characterizing the "industrious citizens" of Troy and a Spartan regime strongly dictatorial and headed by devious Ulysses and wimpish Agamemnon. Petersen ignores the Italian tradition and follows more closely the Anglo-Saxon example striving to make the film look at both sides of the Trojan walls. If Hector is the moral center of the film, Achilles is its most interesting, if a-moral, character, and Agamemnon its malefactor who considers the abduction of Helen and the humiliation of brother Menelaus just as a political opportunity to annex the great city.

The striking feature of the film is, in fact, the unrelenting and unmistakable critique of war and empire building. Read against the context in which it was shot and released, the second half of 2003 and the invasion of Iraq, the arrival of the fearsome Greek fleet at the beaches of the kingdom of Troy resonates deeply, while many of the characters' lines sound, more or less, like verbatim citations from contemporary discourse. After the film's Cannes festival premiere, French Leftist daily *Libération* noted that the film was to be situated in the same context as the "America vs axis-of-evil match." But rather than endorsing the rationale of this match, *Troy* rejected its Manichaeism for its "heroes do not distribute themselves neatly on either side of the impenetrable wall."²² Thus, Agamemnon suggests that "We'll attack them with the greatest force the world has ever seen," a line – as critic John Belfuss ironically commented -- that could be pulled from Bob Woodward's interview notes with George W. Bush circa February 2003.²³ Belfuss also noted that lines like Hector's "No son of Troy will ever submit to foreign rulers", were bound to make the bootleg of the film a big hit among Iraqi insurgents. On the other hand, John Milius, the ultra conservative screenwriter of *Red Dawn* (1984) who proudly supported the war in Iraq and recalled his ancestors'

20 My translation from the Italian dialogue. Henceforth all translations are mine.

21 "Well made lively and funny" commented *Variety*. *Variety*, 14 December, 1927, n.p. *Helen of Troy* (1927) Clipping File, New York Public Library, Bill Rose Collection.

22 Philippe Azzouri and Didier Péron, "Troie, manicule, pas manichéen", *Libération*, 14 May 2005, p.1.

23 John Belfuss, "Glory amid Gore" *Commercial Appeal*, 15 May 2004, p. E1. See also J. D. Connor. "The Anxious Epic", *Boston Globe*, 28 November 2004, p. D1.



deeds in the Confederate Army, was appalled by what Benioff had done with Homer. “Can you believe what those assholes did to [Homer’s *Iliad*] with that film *Troy*?” The screenwriter told *Harper’s* “Me [sic] and my kid, we wanted to take a DVD of the thing, tie it by a cable to our car’s bumper and drag it up and down Hollywood Boulevard.”²⁴

Agamemnon’s notion that “empires are forged by war” is recasting the Trojan war as a war for empire and implicitly denying the possibility of a 2005 reviving of Eisenhower’s “benevolent supremacy.” The film ends outside of *The Iliad* and inside the burning city of Troy, as the camera lingers on blood-thirsty Greek troops lassoing and toppling Trojan statues after the manner deployed by U.S. marines against Saddam Hussein’s giant icons, thus creating one more visual link between Agamemnon’s cohorts and Bush’s troops. In the film, Achilles’s tragic and overall positive status derives from his refusal to subscribe to Agamemnon’s plans. He is, first and foremost, a supreme fighter -- a Muhammad Ali in white face, who directly replicates Ali’s fighting style as he defeats enormous warriors by literally flying like a butterfly and stinging like a bee. And to make matters clearer, Benioff has Achilles “the light-footed” directly quote the boxer: “the Trojans never harmed me,” Achilles tells Odysseus when the king of Ithaca asks him to join the military enterprise against Troy. As opposed to Ali, who refused to fight a war he deemed unjust (“No Viet Cong ever called me nigger”) and lived to become a world icon of freedom, Achilles dies in an unjust battle, killed by the weakest of his foes, just after he has turned his weapons against his own troops to prevent them from raping a defenseless woman.

A bleak meditation about empire is also at the center of *King Arthur* by Antoine Fuqua. The film enlists a legitimate authority on Arthurian history and legend, John Matthews,²⁵ and the skills of *Gladiator* screenwriter David Franzoni to tell a revised version of the story of Arthur. Like the Homeric poems, the Arthurian and the Parsifal cycles, that inspired most famously Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* (1469-70) and Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1882), had generated much footage since Edwin S. Porter’s *Parsifal* 1904 and J. Stuart Blackton’s *Lancelot and Elaine* (1911).²⁶ By 1974, Robert Bresson’s *Lancelot and Guinevere* (1974) could revisit the Arthurian mythology to declare its death and, once dead, the myth could be transformed into farce by the deft hands of Monty Python (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, Terry Gilliam, 1975).

Fuqua’s film tries to inhabit the thin line of territory between fiction and historical verisimilitude. Franzoni had cast the script of *Gladiator* into an almost explicit conversation with its filmic precedents, but this time around the scriptwriter eschewed the reservoir of celluloid memory regarding Arthur, and instead made the film into a commentary on the corruption of the Roman empire. Building on fairly untested theories about Arthur, Franzoni cast the king away from the myth of Camelot and right into the history of the last days of the Roman control of Britannia. The fabled leader is now a Roman centurion of mixed Roman and Sarmathian origins who leads a company

24 Cited in Lawrence Weschler, “Valkyries over Iraq”, *Harper’s*, November 2005, p. 73.

25 John Matthews, *King Arthur: Dark Age Warrior and Mythic Hero*, New York, Gramercy Books, 2004. See also Howard Reid, *Arthur, the Dragon King*, London, Headlines, 2001 and also C.S. Littleton and L.A. Malcor, *From Scythia to Camelot*, New York, Garland, 1994.

26 Mirrored in the Italian cinema by Mario Caserini *Parsifal* (1912) and the Milano Film 1910 version of *Re Artù e i cavalieri della tavola rotonda*.



of Sarmathian knights as they police the farthest borders of the territory controlled by Rome. Arthur, thus, becomes Lucius Artorius Castus, Camelot disappears, and the Round Table appears only as a modest prop of almost Shaker-like visual modesty.

As the myth fades, its place is taken by the mythology of historical expertise. The film begins by suggesting that “[unnamed] Historians agree that the classical 15th century tale of King Arthur and his knights rose from a real hero who lived a thousand years earlier in a period often called the Dark Age. Recently discovered [and unnamed] archaeological evidence sheds light on his true identity.” In the following shot, the film reveals a completely anachronistic map of Europe, the burned and lined edges of the document attesting the “historical” legitimacy of the chart.

The result of this effort for verisimilitude is, according to the *Boston Globe*, “revisionist history.”²⁷ More precisely perhaps – given the wild historical inaccuracy of much of the film – it is a case of radical, downward, social mobility: the King is now a commoner of mixed ancestry; the knights, reduced in number to a mere seven (a number fraught with filmic if not historic implications, think Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurais* and John Sturges’s *The Magnificent Seven*) are free-lance mercenaries (“think the Wild Bunch transported to the Dark Ages,” commented the *Boston Globe*²⁸) redeemed by a final, heroic, stance which leads to an immortalizing death. *King Arthur* does not even mention the Grail (striking choice given the fame accruing to the goblet from Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*); Merlin has lost his magic and has become a local tribal chief of the Celtic-speaking Britons; the young queen Guinevere (Keira Knightley) wields bow and arrows and dons a skimpy, if hardly accurate, costume; the famous triangle between the queen, Arthur, and the gloomy, charismatic, Lancelot (Ioan Gruffud) is sanitized to a couple of safe, albeit soulful, glances exchanged between the King’s best friend and Guinevere. Verisimilitude, not history, is obviously of the essence in *King Arthur*, a fact that the film, which supposedly depicts the last days of Roman domination of Britannia, makes clear by inexplicably setting its date to 467 AD, when Rome actually had withdrawn more than half a century earlier.

In fact, the “Dark Age” metaphor that animates the cinematic depiction of many medieval tales, and which Italian historian Sergio Bertelli has called the “thousand year of darkness” is still operative here. Like many of the “dark age” films Bertelli examined, *King Arthur* is a “film of fiction-history which transmit[s] ... the stereotype of a barbaric Middle Age immediately associated to the notion of the knight, covered head to heel in iron, to the bandit, to the *Raubritter*.”²⁹ The early middle age of *King Arthur* is immersed in a-historical savagery. Cedric (Stellan Skarsgård), the Saxon king, embodies, almost emotes, darkness. His son, Cynric (Til Schweiger), is no better. When demoted to third in command after losing his first skirmish with Artorius and his knights (in a battle that cannibalizes S.M. Eisenstein’s famous frozen lake battle in *Alexander Nevsky*, 1938), he grunts and stabs the first unfortunate body he can reach as his father looks on, pleased. Yet the Dark Age is not the only preoccupation of Franconi’s script. The Dark Age mythology often relied on the notion that what *preceded*, as well

27 *Boston Globe*, 19 December 2004, p. N16

28 *Ibid.*

29 Sergio Bertelli, *Corsari del tempo*, Firenze, Ponte alle Grazie, 1994, p.137.



as what succeeded it, was immersed in the light of culture, refinement, civility. On the contrary, *King Arthur* tells the story of a disillusionment, that of Artorius, with the Roman imperial project.

Parting from any historical evidence other than the probable British birth of the founder of this sect, Franzoni makes Artorius into a follower of Pelagianism, thus a member of a religious minority whose theology is transformed into a vaguely defined humanistic proto-liberalism. Freedom, Artorius believes, is what Rome is about, and Pelagius's influence on Rome's power circles is evidence of Rome's commitment to this mission. Inexplicably, in fact, Artorius is under the impression that Pelagianism is Rome's official credo more than 50 years after Pelagius's expulsion from Rome (in 418 A.D.) and 36 years after the Council of Ephesus's condemnation of his doctrines (in 431 A.D.). He will finally realize that Pelagianism has been eliminated by Roman imperial bureaucracy that has struck a perfidious alliance with the conservative established Christian church. "We have wasted a world to protect a Rome that does not exist," Artorius sadly remarks.

Thus, if the Saxons are the bad guys to be feared, the Romans and their imperial bureaucracy are the film's villains to be committed to the spectators' contempt. It is because of the plotting of the wily Roman Bishop Germanus (Ivano Marescotti) that Artorius is sent in harm's way, and nothing that the savage Cynric and Cedric do is as contemptible as the image of the Roman bureaucrat living in luxury in the midst of his subjects' abject existence. Once the reality of Rome's *mission civilizatrice* has been revealed to him, Artorius and his knights join the Celtic insurgents: "No boundaries," Guinevere tells Lancelot to explain to him what they should be fighting for. "Some people would call that freedom. That's what we fight for. Our land, our people. The right to choose one's destiny." In the *Village Voice* Michael Atkinson noted that "chivalry is swapped for an awakening sense of social injustice and self-destination... [*King Arthur*] is actually the only action film of the summer whose narrative revolves around the creation of a proto-socialist ethos."³⁰

Perhaps proto-socialism is too strong a word for *King Arthur*, but the film does create a gloomy portrait of the Roman empire. The gloom that pervades the film is also highlighted by the studied simplicity of its settings, a far cry from the generic exhibitionism of epic cinema. In this sense, Fuqua's film stands in stark contrast with *Troy* but especially with *Alexander* whose flamboyant sceneries filmed in Morocco, Thailand, and England are a major item of the film's estimated \$150 million budget.³¹ In other aspects, however, *Alexander* and *King Arthur* are similar. Not only, as we shall see, do they share a similar trajectory at the box office, but they also partake of a sense of marginality *vis a vis* the dominant positions in American political debate. Opening at the end of November 2004 after the re-election of George W. Bush on an agenda that included the endorsement of the anti-gay marriage amendment, Colin Farrell's obvious passion towards his male lovers is striking, even though historians, including the film's consultant Robin Lane Fox, stressed that the "the director may have overemphasized homosexuality somewhat" in his depiction of the bisexual

³⁰ Michael Atkinson, *The Village Voice*, 13 July 2004, p.55.

³¹ <http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0346491/boxoffice> (Accessed 12 January 2010).



Macedonian military genius.³² Given Stone's outspoken opposition to the invasion of Iraq, the parallel between George W. Bush's contemporary obsession with destroying Saddam Hussein's regime and the adventurous and ultimately disastrous Far Eastern campaign of Alexander of Macedonia in the 4th century B.C. was almost immediately drawn. "Viewing the movie through the prism of current U.S. foreign policy not only seems appropriate but it keeps the viewer alert," some of the press commented.³³

This Alexander-G.W. Bush nexus can easily be pushed too far. As the film hit Italian theatres, Stone told the Italian daily *La Repubblica* that as opposed to Bush "Alexander stayed in the countries he conquered, wanted to know their customs, and respected them without imposing the Macedonian civilization on them. ... Alexander left the resources where they were, Bush father and son go East to bring the oil back to the States"³⁴ Stone's film also emphasizes Alexander's bisexuality, a trait that would make the Macedonian an improbable alter ego of the U.S. President, and it is also well known that the director had been fascinated with Alexander long before the first election of George W. Bush.³⁵ To be sure, the film seems part of Stone's long-standing project to analyze the complex nature of leadership, a project that was first articulated in the antithesis between Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe) in his most famous film, *Platoon* (1986). Stone revisited this theme in several of the biopics he realized in the course of the last two decades and, in particular, in *Nixon* (1995) which he shot as he was writing the script for *Alexander*. Like the biopic of the Watergate president, *Alexander* has a classical three-act structure going from loss (as Alexander is biding his time waiting for his father King Philip to concede him the throne which he attains only after the murder of his father), to achievement, and again to loss. Like Nixon's legacy, Alexander's is widely debated and uncertain.³⁶ "His reputation has shifted right through every century up to the present day" Stone remarked about his yet un-filmed Alexander script in an interview he gave about the just-released *Nixon*.³⁷ Like *Nixon*, in fact, Stone casts the story of Alexander through the uncertain prism of memory and has both films rely on extensive flashbacks. Regardless of its much remarked-upon flaws, then, *Alexander* takes its place in the gallery of characters that Stone has assembled, a place that is perhaps between *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon*. In this sense, the gloom of Stone's meditation on leaders, especially if openly sexualized as in *Alexander*, was certainly at odds with an American discourse that had rediscovered directness, single-mindedness, and staunch heterosexuality. It also could not escape the conservative press, and *The Washington Times* dutifully reported how Stone missed the opportunity to make a "better movie" by stressing not the commander's hubris and indecision but his single-minded goal "to seek beyond" and "to better the best."³⁸

32 *New York Times*, 20 November 2004, p. 14.

33 *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), 25 November 2004, p. M1.

34 *La Repubblica*, (Rome, Italy), 11 January 2005, p. 44.

35 See Lavington, *Oliver Stone*, p. 260-64.

36 See the interview with Stone by Gavin Smith in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1996, p. 6-9. Now in Charles L. P. Silet (ed.), *Oliver Stone Interviews*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2001, p. 159-171.

37 Silet, *Oliver Stone Interviews*, p. 185. Originally in *Cineaste*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1997, p. 38- 42.

38 *Washington Times*, 16 January 2005, p. B8.



The cosmopolitan epics collapsed badly on the US domestic market. All three films collected a majority of bad reviews and a very slim domestic box office. According to Rottentomatoes.com, *Alexander* received only 14% positive reviews. The percentage of positive notes for *King Arthur* was better, but only slightly so, at 32% and only *Troy* collected a modest 55% of mixed or positive reviews. Bad or good reviews, however, only go so far in helping a movie especially when its release, like that of *King Arthur* and *Alexander*, occurs during a holiday season. Ninety-seven percent of negative reviews accompanied the Thanksgiving release of the family comedy *Christmas with the Kranks* (Joe Roth, 2004), but after a month the film had already more than recouped its budget on the domestic market alone.³⁹ Instead it was at the U.S. box office that all three cosmopolitan epics failed more or less miserably. *Troy*, banking on the appeal of Brad Pitt's star status, opened strongly with a take of \$46 million over its first weekend of U.S. release. It grossed 125 million dollars in one month, and a total of 133 millions at the end of its domestic run -- respectable numbers to be sure, but not even close to those necessary to recoup the production costs of this blockbuster, which were estimated at more than 180 million dollars.⁴⁰

King Arthur's and *Alexander's* performance in the U.S. market was catastrophic. The 100 million dollar *King Arthur* opened on July 7th and was saluted by the *Hollywood Reporter* as "the biggest disappointment" of the weekend. It finished third overall, grossing only \$15 million and bypassed by both *Spider Man II* (Sam Raimi, 2004) and *Anchor Man: Legend of Ron Burgundy* (Adam McKay, 2004). At the end of its U.S. run in October 2004, the film had grossed only 52 million dollars. The failure of Fuqua's film was even more striking given the impressive batting average of his producer, Jerry Bruckheimer. *Troy* and *King Arthur*, concluded *The New York Times*, "were among the season's biggest disappointments."⁴¹ Neither did worse than *Alexander*. By December 7th, Oliver Stone's \$150 million epic had grossed only \$30 millions and was expected to net not more than \$40 million in the U.S.⁴² By January 28th the film had grossed only \$34 million.⁴³ *Alexander* was conclusively termed "megaflop" by the *New York Times*.⁴⁴

Given the somber mood of these films, these epics were a fairly unlikely bet in the U.S. market. With the partial exception of *Troy*, which had Pitt's buffed up body and its share of battle scenes, these films were long, and overall lacked iconic or uplifting scenes. When they delivered speeches, their heroes communicated a disillusioned (Artorius), manic (Alexander), or egomaniac (Agamemnon) view on militarized foreign policy, leadership, and war. In a polarized American market, they somehow fell through the

39 See www.rottentomatoes.com/m/alexander; www.rottentomatoes.com/m/kingarthur, www.rottentomatoes.com/m/Troy, www.rottentomatoes.com/m/christmas_with_the_Kranks. *Alexander* has 25 positive or neutral reviews out 151. *Troy* batting average was better: 114 out of 209. *King Arthur* recorded 55 positive reviews out 172. All of them did better than *Kranks* with 4 positive nods out of 112. By 7 January 2005, however, *Kranks* had garnered 73 millions at the U.S. box office. See <http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0388419/boxoffice> (All accessed 12 January 2010).

40 *Hollywood Reporter*, 14 June 2004. *Troy* had a cumulative box office take of 125.7 millions. For a general review of *Troy's* box office see <http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0332452/boxoffice> (Accessed 12 January 2010).

41 *New York Times*, 7 September, 2004, p. E1.

42 *Financial Times/Global News Wire*, 7 December 2004.

43 <http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0346491/boxoffice> (Accessed 12 January 2010).

44 *New York Times*, 11 January 2005, p. E1.



crack; their apparent adherence to the “sword and sandal” genre alienated the crowds willing to throng theatres exhibiting *Fahrenheit 9.11* (Michael Moore, 2004) and their length, somber mood, and, in the case of *Alexander*, pro-Gay stances -- together with the slew of bad reviews that they garnered in U.S. mainstream press -- alienated the natural constituency of a Hollywood blockbuster. Yet what is even more important is that they survived this domestic failure.

Economic analyses of the film industry show that after the 1948 “Paramount decision” and the ensuing collapse of the studio system the revenues of a movie are increasingly difficult to calculate. The theatrical box office of a film is now only one item of this complex accounting and is not necessarily the largest. Yet one can by no means discount the potentially negative effect of a weak performance on the American market. The theatrical performance of a Hollywood film in US multiplexes is generally considered the central element in generating positive word of mouth and promoting revenues from home entertainment, television rights, and merchandizing -- beside being directly responsible for the moneys collected from domestic refreshment sales. Furthermore, the domestic theatrical performance of a Hollywood movie usually defines how much bargaining power a studio will have in negotiating with foreign distributors and exhibitors (for example, the ability of the studio to use a movie as a “locomotive” for other distribution deals). Edward Epstein concludes in his *The Big Picture* that a strong audience turn-out in the USA, widely reported in the trade press, is a central element in “impress[ing] the gatekeepers of foreign, video, and other ancillary markets.”⁴⁵

This makes the size of the success of these films *outside* the U.S. market, which largely offset their failure in the USA even more remarkable. Their American failure did not compromise, but in some cases, almost aided their fate overseas. *Troy* hit the ground running all over the world. In August, *Daily Variety* noted how the film had bumped up the German box office of Hollywood productions which had been negatively affected by the confrontation between the two countries over the invasion of Iraq.⁴⁶ In Italy, by May 25th, 2004, the film was ahead of all others⁴⁷ and the main Italian news agency, ANSA, termed the film’s performance “exceptional.”⁴⁸ By January 2005, it was clear that *Troy* had returned more than its costs on the overseas market and so had *King Arthur*. Strikingly, by the end of October 2004, the tale of the reluctant hero Artorius Castus had made \$194 million worldwide, of which only \$52 million had come from the US domestic market.⁴⁹ In a case which inversely mirrored the U.S., on its Italian release. *King Arthur* beat even the juggernaut *Spiderman II* at the box office.⁵⁰ By the end of November when *Alexander* had seen distribution outside of the U.S., *Daily Variety* commented that “*Alexander* may be fighting a losing battle for box office glory in the USA, but Oliver Stone’s epic was more victorious as it began its offshore crusade

45 See Epstein, *The Big Picture*, p. 202. On the “locomotive” effect of the Hollywood hit see *ibidem*, p.103. On the “Paramount Case” and the end of the studio system see Thomas Cripps, *Hollywood High Noon*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 220.

46 *Daily Variety*, 19 August 2004, p. 21.

47 *La Stampa*, 25 May 2004, p 32.

48 ANSA, 24 May 2004.

49 <http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0349683/boxoffice> (Accessed 12 January 2010).

50 ANSA, 4 October 2004.



last weekend.”⁵¹ The overseas success of the film, while repeating that of *Troy* and *King Arthur*, proved vaguely befuddling to *Daily Variety*: “aud[ience]s overseas enjoy large scale films depicting historical struggles,”⁵² something that American audiences did not.

Daily Variety ignored, however, that the marketing of the cosmopolitan epics was much easier abroad than it had been in the USA. First, the international nature of their casts was a good selling point for these films. This was especially true in the European markets where – given the financial impossibility for Hollywood to blanket its intended audience through television ads – star recognition is often one of the main selling points of a film. With British stars Clive Owen, Ioan Gruffud, Keira Knightley in the main roles and Swedish Stellan Skarsgård, Italian Ivano Marescotti, and German Til Schweiger as their opponents, *King Arthur* garnered an impressive, and quite marketable, European cast. Next to Brad Pitt, *Troy* had a German director, Wolfgang Petersen, at its helm. Its Mexican and Bulgarian extras fighting on sets built in Mexico and Malta were being led by British actors Brian Cox, Peter O’Toole, Julie Christie, Sean Bean, Orlando Bloom, Irish thespian Brendan Gleeson, Australian Eric Bana, and German Diane Kruger. Comparatively speaking, *Alexander* was overall solidly American though it sported Irish Collin Farrell in the title role and British Anthony Hopkins (Ptolemy) and Canadian Christopher Plummer (Aristotle) in supporting parts while a Mexican DP (Rodrigo Prieto) filmed its powerful battle scenes. Beside Warner Bros. investment, *Troy* also received production money from British Intermedia Film, German IMF (International Medien und Film GmbH & Co. 3. Produckitionen KG) and Dutch Egmond Film and Television.

On the European markets, the somber views of these films could be effectively played out as a marketing “hook.” From Berlin, Wolfgang Petersen stressed to the German press that the shooting of *Troy* overlapped with the beginning of the invasion of Iraq. The director drew a direct parallel between Agamemnon’s ploy to use Helena as a pretext to begin his war against Troy and George W. Bush’s use of shaky evidence relating to Iraqi WMD as a ruse to start a war for possession of Iraqi oil.⁵³ In the USA Brad Pitt was solely speaking about his divorce from Jennifer Aniston, yet in his European appearances the actor openly criticized U.S. foreign policy -- especially in an interview in the German film magazine *Cinema* which was widely reported in Germany but not at all in the USA.⁵⁴

The multinational producers of *Alexander* “expect[ed] the film to do much better internationally, just as *Troy* did recently.”⁵⁵ In the launching of *Alexander* in Europe, Stone could openly capitalize on his opposition to Bush and the invasion of Iraq (“in Iraq we did everything wrong, and we are now paying the consequences [of our

51 *Daily Variety*, 30 November 2004, 12.

52 Ibid.

53 See the interviews with Petersen in *General-Anzeiger (Bonn)*, 13 May 2004, p. 33, and also *Die Welt*, 13 May, 2004. On Petersen’s view see also ANSA, 9 May 2004.

54 Associated Press Worldstream – German, 20 April 2004.

55 *Turkish Daily News*, 7 December 2004 <http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/> (Accessed February 4, 2011).



mistakes]”⁵⁶ and stress his European origins (German father and French mother) “with pride.”⁵⁷ While also remarking that his work on *Alexander* had begun a decade earlier, at the end of November, the “polémico realizador” confided to Agencia Efe, the Spanish Newswire Service, that he could see the parallelism between Bush and Alexander and found it “fascinating.”⁵⁸ This marketing strategy could easily rest on the reality of Stone’s long-standing opposition to the Bush Administration and the unpopularity of the American president and U.S. foreign policy in Spain. Indeed “exhib[itor]s noted that *Alexander* tapped into an anti-Americanism rampant among Spain’s youth since Stone is admired as an icon of American anti-establishment.”⁵⁹ It also paid off, and *The Hollywood Reporter* (Online edition) remarked that “Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* appears to be joining *King Arthur*, *Troy* and *The Last Samurai* in recovering lost ground overseas after a disappointing run in the domestic market.... Spain led the way in *Alexander* charge with \$6.9 million from 396 screens in a five-day bow.”⁶⁰

Daily Variety commented that the *Alexander* debut had been “impressive” and had claimed the top spot in Russia, Taiwan, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Thailand, Croatia, and Malaysia.⁶¹ Actually “epics like *Troy* and the *Last Samurai* helped power Warner Bros to a \$2 billion overseas gross as of this week.”⁶² Stunningly, *Alexander* took in a spectacular \$88 million outside the USA – almost three times its total domestic box office of \$34 million. Similarly, *Troy* earned \$133 million domestically and \$364 million worldwide. In Italy, *Alexander*’s opening was 38% ahead of *Gladiator*.⁶³ Even the critical discourse was kinder and gentler in Europe. In the debate about *Alexander*, concerns resurfaced that animate the cultural dialogue between Europe and the U.S.. American poor box office and the fact that the film had been dismissed by American critics could become a selling point. In an interview to the Italian daily *La Repubblica*, Stone juxtaposed his opposition to Bush’s foreign policy, the American flop of his film, and his concern with “American cultural imperialism,” a very current topic in European intellectual circles.⁶⁴ In the prestigious cultural pages of *La Repubblica*, Natalia Aspesi called attention to the “many merits” of the film by the “bravo Stone”

56 *La Repubblica*, 11 January 2005, p. 44.

57 ANSA, 10 January 2005.

58 Agencia Efe, 24 November 2004. See also *La Stampa*, 9 November 2004, p. 29.

59 *Variety*, 17 January 2005, p. 14.

60 The Hollywood Reporter.Com, 11 January 2005 <http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxy-um.researchport.umd.edu/hottopics/Inacademic/> (Accessed February 4, 2011).

61 *Daily Variety*, 6 December 2004, p. 24.

62 *Daily Variety*, 10 December 2004, p. 72.

63 *Daily Variety*, 18 January 2005, p. 6, and *Variety*, 17 January 2005, p. 14.

64 *La Repubblica*, 11 January 2005, p. 44. On the debate about US cultural imperialism in Europe see Philippe Roger, *L'ennemi américain*, Paris, Seuil, 2002; Serge Regourd, *L'exception culturelle*, Paris, PUF, 2002; Rob Kroes, R. W. Rydell, D.F.J. Bosscher, *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions. American Mass Culture in Europe*, Amsterdam, VU, 1993; Rob Kroes “American Empire and Cultural Imperialism. A View from the Receiving End” in Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, p. 295-313; Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War. The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1994; Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May (eds.), *Here, There, and Everywhere.” The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture*, Hannover, University Press of New England, 2000; Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger (eds.), *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations. American Culture in Western Europe and Japan*, New York, Berghahn, 2000; Mary Nolan, “Anti-Americanization in Germany” Andrew Ross and Kristin Ross (eds.), *Anti-Americanism*, p. 125-143.



unjustly “clobbered” by American critics.⁶⁵ The dean of Italian film critics, *La Stampa*’s Lietta Tornabuoni, remarked that *Alexander* contained “some beautiful things,” among which were the battle scenes in India, Alexander’s project of tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and the “perfect legs and thighs of Colin Farrell.”⁶⁶ The Swiss critic of *Le temps* noted that the American critics had judged *Alexander* harshly in order to make this film a “commercial disaster” which could only be avoided by a successful world distribution. American critics had been unfair because *Alexander* is, in fact, “impressive” (“impressionant”) and deserves “to be seen and discussed.”⁶⁷

Looking at a crop of 2007 films that include *Shooter*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, *Lions for Lambs*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *Rendition*, and *Redacted*, Michael Shapiro has recently noted the disconnect between the “new violent cartography” of American foreign policy and American “cinema’s increasingly political and anti-militarization impetus evident at international film festivals and in Hollywood’s feature films.”⁶⁸ Shapiro’s thoughtful analysis remains largely textual and the reasons why these films exist remain unexplained. The case of the cosmopolitan epic, however, reveals that the opposition to U.S. foreign policy was able to rely on transnational networks and audiences that were not necessarily available to films proposing explanations of current events grounded in the American administration’s rationales.⁶⁹ Deceptively edited celebrations of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq like *Voices of Iraq* (2004) or even intelligent portraits of the pains of young American troops in Baghdad, like *Gunner Palace* (Michael Tucker, 2004), did business almost exclusively in the United States. More than small productions, big budget films need a global box office. *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), Ridley Scott’s film on the Christian crusades, had at its center a fairly bland Christian hero, Balian of Ibelin (Orlando Bloom), who is fighting Saladin (Syrian actor Ghassan Massoud) who was “as cool as a long drink of water.”⁷⁰ The character of the Muslim commander was obviously a stand-in for modern day moderate Muslims. Saladin is a heroic, 12th century, Sitting Bull fighting off crazed, bloodthirsty, Guy de Lusignan (Marton Csokas) -- George Armstrong Custer in iron mail and Templar attire. Flamboyantly termed “Osama Bin Laden’s version of history” by Cambridge University’s historian Jonathan Riley Smith,⁷¹ *Kingdom* “captured the admiration of Muslims” according to British *Independent*’s Robert Fisk. It did, however, flop in the UK and USA because, Fisk suggested, “we felt uncomfortable at the way the film portrayed ‘us’, the crusaders[.]”⁷² Indeed *Kingdom*, budgeted at \$130 millions, was a catastrophe in the US market gathering only \$47

65 “Un sontuoso Kolossal gay per l’eroe guerriero visionario” *La Repubblica* 11 January 2005, p. 45. Francesco Gallo, on Ansa, the Italian News Service wrote that the battles in *Alexander* are “not to be missed” (“imperdibili”). ANSA, 10 January 2005. See also the review by Roberto Escobar in *Il Sole 24 Ore* 23 January 2005, p. 18 which defends the film suggesting that “there is something great in something that fails because of its own excesses.”

66 *La Stampa*, 11 January 2005, p. 31.

67 *Le temps* (Geneva, CH), 5 January 2005, 6.

68 Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 37.

69 By October 2004 Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9.11* had made \$120 million in the U.S. but garnered almost as much abroad. See www.pro.imdb.com/title/tt0361596/boxoffice (Accessed January 12 2010).

70 *New York Times*, 6 May 2005, p. B1.

71 *Washington Post*, 14 May 2005, p. B8.

72 Robert Fisk, “Watching *Kingdom of Heaven* in Beirut” *The Independent*, June 4, 2005, 7. <http://www.voicesforpeace.com/talkshop/peace/messages/647.html> (Accessed 4 February 2011)



millions. Abroad, however, it behaved exactly as the three films we have dealt with in this essay, making more than three times as much as the US box office, or \$208 millions.⁷³

Already in 1955 former Office of War Information analyst Dorothy Jones had discovered how economic concerns had shaped the textual body of Laslo Benedeck's *Bengal Brigade* (1954). Eager to please non-American audiences, and especially the massive Indian one, Universal's producers had radically modified the film's narrative line trying to give space to Indian characters and stress the necessity of human brotherhood.⁷⁴ It was in fact in the 1950s that producers began to identify with greatest clarity the importance of foreign markets. In the Fifties the percentage of foreign box office jumped to 40% to reach 53% in the early Sixties. Given the growing importance of the foreign markets the producers of the 1950s blockbusters were unlikely to disregard the foreign reception of their movies and tried to give these movies what John Izod calls "universal appeal."⁷⁵ Cosmopolitanism paid. Not by chance the most representative producers of the 1950s epics, Dino de Laurentiis (John Huston, *The Bible*, 1966) and Samuel Bronston (Anthony Mann, *El Cid* 1961) were Americans born abroad, (in Italian Campania or Rumanian Bessarabia respectively), educated in France or in Italy, and as comfortable in Spain or in Rome as in Hollywood.⁷⁶ Bronston or de Laurentiis crafted films that had the ear of transnational audiences that included but were larger than the US.

And yet, it is important to remark that the "universal appeal" of these films included American audiences. Cecil B. De Mille's *Ten Commandments* earned more than four times the domestic box office of Elvis Presley's 1956 vehicle, *Love Me Tender* (Robert D. Webb, 1956), and six out of the twelve movies which topped the domestic box office from 1950 to 1962 were "sword and sandal" epic films.⁷⁷ But at the time of the second Iraqi invasion, as American foreign policy and vision became increasingly questioned, this "universal appeal" of Hollywood movies was harder and harder to achieve especially for a genre like the epic that often engages an international context and dabbles with policy issues.

In a moment in which the consumption of American movies became a politicized act on both sides of the Atlantic, the epic film had to choose which master to please the most. The figures written on the wall gave Hollywood a fairly clear indication of the more convenient option. In 2003, the Hollywood global product derived more than 50% of its entire take from non-U.S. markets and the lion's share of this foreign box office came from just 8 national audiences: Japan, Great Britain, Germany, France, Spain, Mexico, Italy and Australia. For Hollywood global products the consequences of

73 <http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0320661/boxoffice> (Accessed January 12 2010).

74 Dorothy B. Jones, "Foreign Sensibilities Are Even More Unpredictable than Foreign Quota and Currency Restrictions" *Films in Review* Vol. 6. No. 9, 1955, p. 449-451. See also Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry. Western Europe and America since 1945*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1969, p. 4.

75 John Izod, *Hollywood and the Box Office 1895-1986*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, 158.

76 On Bronston see Mark Jankovich, "The Purest Knight of All, Nation, History and Representation in *El Cid*" *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2000, p. 83. On de Laurentiis see Tullio Kezich and Alessandra Levantesi, *Dino. De Laurentiis, la vita e i film*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2001.

77 McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, p. 44.



ignoring Kansas was less serious than dismissing the sentiments of French, Japanese, or German audiences among whom dissent with current American foreign policy was widespread and vocal.⁷⁸ In the words of London's *Financial Times*, the cosmopolitan epics saw U.S. adventures abroad, as "tarnished utopianism of nation-building and regime-changing. The siege of Troy was a campaign of dubious motivation, brimming with geopolitical nerve (or foolhardiness) and turning tragic with bloodshed and longevity. Alexander's conquests were a headlong overrun of capitulating kingdoms pursuing a ruthless, ultimately impossible dream of homogenizing the world into one creed and culture."⁷⁹ At the cost of compromising their American citizenship, the epics of 2004 had to position themselves as citizens of the world.

78 See Laura M. Holson, "More than Ever, Hollywood Studios Are Relying on the Foreign Box Office" *New York Times* 7 August 2006, p. C1.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/07/business/worldbusiness/07movie.html> (Accessed February 4, 2011). For the relative weight of these national audiences on the box office of a Hollywood film see Epstein, *The Big Picture*, p. 204. Pertinent data on "US Favorability Rating" are in Pew Research Centre "A Year after the Iraqi War" March 16, 2004. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=206> (Accessed January 12 2010). See also Pew Research Center "The Spread of Anti-Americanism" January 24, 2005 <http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=104> (Accessed on January 12, 2010). See also "Living with a Superpower" *The Economist*, 2 January 2003, p. 16. And "Anti-Americanism: The view from abroad" *The Economist*, 17 February 2005, p. 21.

79 *Financial Times*, 1 May 2004, p. 34.



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