IS THIS SPARTA?

ALLEGORY, ANALOGY, AND WARFARE IN THE POST-9/11 ANCIENT WORLD EPIC FILM

Submitted by Christopher Owen Graham Davies to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film Studies in February 2016.

Abstract

This thesis examines the depiction of warfare in post-9/11 ancient world epics and assesses the extent to which these films engage with contemporary events by means of allegory and analogy.

Inspired by scholarship on allegorical and analogous interpretations of 1950s-60s ancient world epics, I explore how the current cycle engages with the American socio-political landscape in the wake of 9/11, with particular emphasis on the War on Terror and ensuing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. I chart the genre's evolution in relation to the combat film, and examine how the current cycle of ancient world epics integrates the tropes of other genres into its portrayal of warfare, invasion, occupation and imperialism. Within this context, I explore the recurrent motif of the father-son dynamic, and assess how its use in combat films corresponds to that in ancient world epics. I also discuss how this motif was employed in 1980s Vietnam War films, and what its use in these modern epics suggests about the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, I discuss the use of the unreliable narrator to engage with wider debates on the value of historical films compared to written history.

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that the ancient world epic is a malleable construct with which filmmakers can engage with the present while depicting the past. I build on existing studies of the ancient world in cinema, contributing new understanding of the current cycle's relationship to its predecessors, to other genres, and to post-9/11 American society. In so doing this thesis contributes to notions of film as art, as industry, and as history, and how they intersect in cinematic depictions of the ancient world.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has taken four and half years to complete, and those years have been the most eventful of my life. I've lost and gained family members, run a society and a marathon, moved to a new city, and gone from being a part-time cleaner to a full-time employee of the BBFC. Throughout it all, this thesis has been a constant companion; fascinating, frustrating, and challenging. Reaching this point has been an epic adventure in itself, and I could not have done it without the help of others.

Foremost amongst these has been my supervisor, James Lyons. Not only has his knowledge, guidance, and advice been invaluable, but he has shown Herculean levels of patience as I missed deadlines and prolonged this study while pursuing my current career. He has always been considerate, encouraging and supportive, and it is testament to his professionalism that I have reached this stage.

I'm immensely grateful to my friends, family, and colleagues for putting up with me all these years. Special thanks go to two fellow doctoral candidates: to Mike Rose-Steel, for his (sometimes sardonic) support, and to Edward Lamberti for his empathetic ear and encouragement. Huge thanks also go to David Brake, Patrick Taylor, Oli Carey, Jamie McMeekin, Adam Connors, Kate Wilson, and to all my other friends who have excused my reclusiveness while studying and kept me company when I wasn't.

None of this would have been possible without the great generosity of my dad. I cannot thank him enough for giving me the opportunity to pursue my interests and ambitions with this thesis, and in life itself. To both my parents, I give my utmost love and gratitude for all their support, encouragement, patience, and for always being there when I needed them. You mean the world to me.

Finally, thanks to Ridley Scott for creating *Gladiator*, and inspiring all of this.

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Introduction

> …these antiquarian extravaganzas are ultimately not about Abraham or Ben Hur, Spartacus or Maximus, or about anonymous Christian martyrs and converted centurions, but about ourselves, or, more precisely, about our ideals, conveniently presented in the flattering but distancing guise of armour and toga and confirmed by the authority of the past.[1]

Amelia Arenas' vignette, quoted above, is emblematic of a commonly held view expressed in academic analyses of the ancient world in cinema. The presumption that films such as *Ben-Hur* (1959) or *Gladiator* (2000) are as much – if not more – about the period and culture in which they were produced than that which they depict has been repeated to the extent that it could be mistaken as a truism. Jeffrey Richards, for instance, opens his monograph with the statement: "historical films are always about the time in which they are made and never about the time in which they are set."[2] Richards, like Pierre Sorlin, is a self-confessed exponent of what Robert Burgoyne has defined as the "presentist" position.[3] Others are more measured in their approach, acknowledging that historical films can reflect on their present while also informing viewers about the past. James Russell, for example, states that: "Filmmakers have used the power to depict the past both to stress their own cultural standing and to make politically and socially resonant statements about the past and the present."[4]

Of the wealth of historical worlds represented in cinema, those depicting classical antiquity have garnered extensive academic interest for both their envisioning of the past and for being vehicles for contemporary reflection. The imperial Roman Empire has proved especially rich ground for interpretation, with Monica Silveira Cyrino believing it: "continues to serve as a popular analogue for modern society".[5] To date, however, the majority of scholarship on the ancient world in cinema has been devoted to what is arguably the genre's most iconic and popular period, dating from around the release of *Samson and Delilah* in 1949 to *The Greatest Story Ever Told* in 1965. As sources differ on when this cycle began and ended, I will refer to it simply as the '1950s-60s cycle'. While the success of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* in 2000 appeared to reignite interest in the genre among Hollywood studios, global audiences, and academics alike, the cycle of ancient world epics that followed *Gladiator* has, to date, only begun to be explored by the scholarly community.

This thesis is among the first works to discuss this cycle at length, with the principal aim of assessing the extent to which these films could be regarded as a “popular analogue for modern society”.

The idea that these films can contain contemporary allegorical and analogous material is predicated on the notion that historical films are not solely concerned with the history they depict. Indeed, whether the value of historical films resides in their depiction of the past or relationship to their present has been a divisive topic ever since journals encouraged interest in the subject in the 1960s. This interest expanded across the 1970s and early 1980s, and has continued to flourish ever since.[6] The reason why these films elicit such attention among the academic community perhaps derives from their status as multivalent texts: their subject matter can appeal to a vast array of disciplines and encompass a cornucopia of topics. For instance, the ancient world epics discussed in this thesis led to my researching aspects of ancient history, modern history, mythology, politics, genre and auteur theory, reception studies, masculinity and the body, and the film industry itself. This diversity has resulted in literature on historical films being amassed from a variety of disciplines, and has inspired lively debate among scholars as to the merits of historical films and the study thereof. In depicting historical characters, events, and civilisations, these films possess a liminality whereby they exist as works of cinematic art, industrial products and, theoretically, as pieces of historical analysis. It is not uncommon to find some authors – especially historians – dismissing historical films as inferior to written history due to the inaccuracies inherent in most cinematic recreations of the past. Pierre Sorlin, for instance, complains that historical films are: “a dissertation about history which does not question its subject…but which establishes relationships between facts and offers a more or less superficial view of them.”[7] Instead, he asserts that:

> Historical films are concerned with the problems of the present even if that concern is expressed only indirectly…On the surface, they deal with historical events…but from the vast range of possible choices, film-makers have singled out those characters, circumstances, and dates that have a direct bearing on contemporary circumstances. We could say that the past is narrated in the present tense, or that it is rebuilt on contemporary references.[8]

Sorlin argues that historical films can tell us more about the period in which they are made than they can about the period they depict.[9] Indeed, his

assertions would appear to validate the hypothesis – central to this thesis – that post-9/11 ancient world epics contain allusions to contemporary events, perhaps transmitted through the devices of allegory, analogy or allusion (terms which will be discussed below). However, while I concur with Sorlin's suggestion that historical films can provide an insight into events contemporaneous with their production, his perspective is overly reductive and omits anti-allegorical texts and the ability of historical films to actively engage with the history they depict.

Chief among his challengers is Robert A. Rosenstone, who describes Sorlin as possessing "ambivalence towards film as history."[10] Rosenstone exemplifies the growing number of historians who have come to regard historical films as invaluable texts which contribute to the study of history. Inspired in part by his own experience working as a consultant on historical films, he has pragmatically suggested that a critic should not judge a film based purely on its historical 'accuracy', but rather consider the "codes, conventions, and practices by which they bring history to the screen."[11] These conventions embody the needs of filmmakers to translate the often sprawling and complex reality behind a historical event into a cohesive drama with mass appeal. Examples include the compression of events and historical figures for the sake of clarity, displacement of time in structuring a sequence of events, and creating recognisable character motivations.[12] While these alterations may seem distinct from the 'factual' nature of written history, the processes by which each are constructed are remarkably similar. Alan Munslow, for instance, has stated that: "Just like written history, film history is a fictive, genre-based, heavily authored, factually selective, ideologically driven, condensed, emplotted, targeted and theorised representation."[13] As my analysis of films such as *300* (2007) and *Alexander* (2004) will show, the current cycle of ancient world epics display a remarkable self-awareness regarding the ('ideologically driven') construction of history.[14] This is especially relevant to the ancient world, as the fragmentary nature of many sources leaves considerable room for interpretation and, for the filmmakers, invention.

While Rosenstone has championed the historical film as history, Johnathan Stubbs has criticised him for favouring "esoteric, experimental, anti-illusionist filmmaking" over more populist works.[15] The films discussed in this thesis

largely fall into the latter group: they are in the English language, prioritise action and visual spectacle, and were marketed to wide audiences. The study of historical films should not be limited to those films which engage most extensively with historical debates, as even those which, on the surface, appear superficial – such as *300*'s comic book adaptation – can engage with history in a variety of ways. Furthermore, Stubbs complains that despite Rosenstone encouraging an awareness of the conventions inherent in adapting history for the screen, he fails to fully explore the individual production histories of films he cites. Stubbs suggests: "By neglecting the cultural forces that shaped them as they were produced and examining them only in relation to the historical events they represent, he reduces their complexity as historical artefacts of their own time."[16] By contrast, Robert Brent Toplin encourages research into the production history of a given film, as well as considering the filmmakers' intentions in the formation of meaning.[17] These authors were influential in laying the foundations of this thesis and informing my methodology. Throughout, I refer to the conventions Rosenstone details and consider the films' relationship to history, but also explore the individual production histories of the films I analyse and utilise Toplin's suggestion that directors, writers and producers should be considered in the creation of meaning.

While influenced by the authors mentioned above, my approach also differs in some respects. For example, Rosenstone and Marcia Landy attempt to define and group various historical films across specific categories, such as the 'dramatic feature', 'documentary' and 'innovative' film.[18] Personally, I find this approach limiting as not all films fit exclusively into one such category. Instead, I treat each film individually with regards to its treatment of historical material, but introduce some designations based on setting, themes or aesthetic in order to compare and contrast their treatment of particular tropes. This is in part because my principal area of interest is in how the films engage with the periods in which they were produced rather than how they engage with written history. The former of these is itself open to alternate interpretations, as while parallels between past and present may be regarded as a comment on contemporary events, Sorlin has suggested they may also

be a device to simplify the past to aid in audience comprehension of a complex historical narrative.[19]

Given the Americentrism of the attacks of September 11th 2001, the War on Terror, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the predominance of Hollywood films in this thesis, an exploration of American historical films was an important part of my research. While Rosenstone employs a diverse group of films from various countries and periods to illustrate his points, Toplin's work is generally centred on films depicting American history. Where this proved most beneficial for my research was in his extensive work on the films of Oliver Stone, both in his own monographs and in his edited volume *Oliver Stone's USA*. In establishing the themes, conventions and tropes of historical films in the decade prior to the release of *Gladiator*, James Russell's *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood* and Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper's *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* were invaluable. As Russell and McCrisken and Pepper draw on films that predate the end of the Cold War to expand and inform their discussion, I also draw on analysis of 1990s historical epics in assessing how the genre has developed in relation to the ancient world epic cycle. Furthermore, while the majority of films discussed in the texts above focus on American history, Russell and Burgoyne proved helpful in introducing early analysis of recent ancient world epics into my study, namely *Gladiator* and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

From here I turned to the existing literature on the ancient world epic, the vanguard of which comprises largely of classicists who have developed an interest in cinematic representations of antiquity. Their work is largely built on the foundation laid by Jon Solomon's influential monograph *The Ancient World in the Cinema*. First published in 1978 and somewhat short on textual analysis, it is nonetheless an invaluable source for assessing the range of films depicting the ancient world from the silent-era to the late 1970s (and has since been updated following the release of *Gladiator*). Solomon's work solidified the ancient world epic as an area of academic interest, and in the early 1980s, Derek Elley's *The Epic Film* built upon it to provide a similar overview of the historical epic (from the ancient world to Viking epics) while also offering succinct but insightful analysis of particular films. Coinciding with the revival of the historical epic in cinema explored by Russell and McCrisken

and Pepper, the 1990s saw the publication of a number of studies on various aspects of the ancient world in cinema. This included Babington and Evans' *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema*, which provides an extensive assessment of the themes and tropes of Hollywood's biblical epics across the Old and New Testaments, as well as Roman epics which contain biblical material. Maria Wyke's *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* remains one of the quintessential texts on ancient Roman history on screen. Taking particular historical events or characters as the central theme of each chapter, she assesses their various cinematic incarnations from the silent-era onwards. For each, she assesses their themes, similarities and differences, reception and marketing, and their relationship to American and Italian history. The 1990s also saw the publication of Martin M. Winkler's edited volume *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, which took classical narrative devices and mythology and found their contemporary counterparts across a range of genres, including the western, sci-fi, and combat film. In the wake of *Gladiator*'s release, Winkler has edited a series of collected volumes on ancient world epics, including *Gladiator*, *Troy* (2004), *Spartacus* (1960), and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). Cyrino's various contributions to the subject have also been of great value to this thesis, beginning with her monograph *Big Screen Rome*.

Across these and other texts published since the success of *Gladiator*, the tropes of the ancient world epic – primarily those of the 1950s-60s cycle – have been identified and explored extensively. Similar to the epic cycle of the 1950s-60s, however, scholarship on ancient world epics has frequently given greater weight to Roman epics than those set in ancient Greece (the reasons for which will become evident below). This has made Gideon Nisbet's *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture* an extremely valuable book to my research, as it provides an overview of the issues facing ancient Greece in cinema followed by analysis on three major titles in the current cycle: *Troy*, *Alexander*, and *300*. Alastair J.L. Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin's *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* has supplemented this with some additional case studies of more unusual Greek epics, including Disney's animated *Hercules* (1997). Comparatively, the current cycle of ancient world epics is yet to be fully explored by the scholarly community. Of the films in the

current cycle, those released in 2004 have received the greatest focus among scholars, although few have explored the issues of allegory and analogy in these films. Similarly, the topic of this thesis figures little in Andrew B. R. Elliott's 2014 edited volume *The Return of the Epic Film*. Elliott's collection gathers a range of essays on epic films released in the wake of *Gladiator*, including fantasy, medieval and South-East Asian epics. Those on ancient world epics reiterate previously available information, with some small additions to research on *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Centurion* (2010) and *The Eagle* (2011). However, the analyses of these films are limited in scope and detail. This thesis therefore contributes new insight into a series of historical films which have yet to be fully explored, while expanding on the scholarship available. Not only do the chapters which follow assess the extent to which the current cycle of ancient world epics can be regarded as engaging with the post-9/11 social and political landscape, but they also contribute new research to the study of genre cycles and hybridity, and to the evolution of the historical epic itself. I explore the ways in which these films engage with history and the methods with which they utilise the symbolic connotations of certain historical narratives, such as the Spartan defence of Thermopylae. By collating this research, I assess the extent to which these films engage with the period in which they were made.

First, it is important to establish the relationship between the ancient world epic and the devices of analogy, allegory, and allusion, as these are central to the arguments put forward in this thesis. Films depicting the ancient world date back to the foundations of cinema in the early 1900s. Initially, short films set in antiquity were designed to utilise sources already known to audiences – including plays, novels, myths, and biblical stories – to display cinema's ability to recreate the past while also validating the new medium through association with the prestige qualities of the classical world.[20] Many of these films, especially those depicting Greco-Roman history and mythology, were French or Italian productions, with American filmmakers placing particular emphasis on biblical stories.[21] As the medium progressed into the 1910s, historical epics pushed boundaries in terms of visual spectacle and cinematic technology, with their depiction of large-scale sets and crowd scenes, longer running times, editing within scenes, and camera movement.[22] Italian epics led the

way, including the extraordinary sets and use of tracking shots in *Cabiria* (1914), which in turn inspired D.W. Griffith's Babylon sequences in *Intolerance* (1916). Griffith's film ambitiously interwove a number of storylines – including the crucifixion of Christ – across various periods of history united by the film's titular theme. These settings included Griffith's America, and the use of a contemporary story as a parallel for an ancient narrative became a recurrent trope of the epic in the 1920s, including *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925) and *The Ten Commandments* (1923). Derek Elley has cited this development as "the clearest demonstration of the epic's ability to embody 'message' as much as any other genre."[23] The paralleling of ancient and contemporary stories enabled filmmakers to utilise the past to create analogies and allegories within their narratives, providing a moral message alongside the spectacle. However, the genre was taken from its "adolescence to adulthood", to quote Elley, in Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), which omitted a parallel contemporary story in favour of allowing audiences to draw their own conclusions as to the story's relevance to modern life.[24]

With the coming of sound films and the Great Depression hitting America, Hollywood produced fewer epics heading into the 1930s. Those that were made nonetheless contained material believed to be reflective of their period of production: Arthur J. Pomeroy, for instance, argues that Cecil B. DeMille's *Cleopatra* (1934) mirrored the social concerns which pervaded the gangster films of the era, while Elley states that Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927) is permeated by "sophisticated twenties wit".[25] Maria Wyke has noted that the introduction of sound led Hollywood studios to favour dialogue filled with the language and idioms of the then-present day, even when depicting the past.[26] In interviews and publicity for some releases, various allusions, analogies and allegories to modern American life and world events were emphasised. A study guide tie-in accompanying *Cleopatra* asked children how far DeMille's depiction of the ancient world is like America, while the director himself stated in an interview promoting *The Sign of the Cross* (1932):

> Do you realize the close analogy between the conditions in the United States and the Roman Empire prior to the fall? Multitudes in Rome were then oppressed by distressing laws, overtaxed and ruled by a chosen few. Unless America returns to the pure ideals of our legendary forebears, it will pass into oblivion as Rome did.[27]

DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* was re-issued in 1944 with an additional prologue and coda featuring allied planes flying over Rome. The implied analogy positioned the allied forces as synonymous with the Christians who oppose Nero/Mussolini's totalitarian regime; a suggestion which reverses DeMille's self-promoted reading of the film from 1932 in which he equates the Roman Empire with America.[28] In both cases, however, Rome is perceived antagonistically. This was not always the case, though, as in 1937 Mussolini's government had itself backed an Italian-produced epic, *Scipione l'Africano*, which depicted the Roman defeat of Carthage as an analogous piece of propaganda for Mussolini's desire to annex North Africa.[29]

In the post-war years, America's role in the allied victory over three fascist superpowers, the return of soldiers to domestic life, a 'baby-boom', and the instigation of the Cold War and subsequent 'Red Scare' would form the backdrop of a new cycle of ancient world epics.[30] The motif of freedom versus tyranny ran through much of the cycle, echoing the terminology used by President Truman when remarking on the beginnings of the Cold War in 1947.[31] Religion became a significant factor in both the films and political rhetoric of the period, with Eisenhower stating in 1953 that belief in God was an integral part of being an American, unlike the atheist Communist opposition.[32] During the 1950s, church membership rose to 69% of the US population by 1960, and in 1954 the phrase 'One nation under God' was added to the pledge of allegiance recited daily by American schoolchildren.[33] Epics such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* and its sequel *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *Ben-Hur*, and *Spartacus* promoted Judeo-Christian values alongside themes of family and freedom. As Wyke has summarised:

> The film's narratives were also thought capable of matching their spectacle and appeal, offering subjects that were prestigious yet familiar, seemly uncontroversial, educational, spiritually uplifting, and of immense relevance to conservative America's self-portrayal during the Cold War era as the defender of the Faith against the godlessness of Communism.[34]

DeMille sought to make this clear in his 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*. Publicity for the film emphasised its supposed historical accuracy, with photos depicting DeMille surrounded by books and the publication of a tie-in book compiling various pieces of research utilised by the filmmakers which was printed by the University of Southern California Press.[35]

Nevertheless, DeMille still drew parallels between his film and contemporary America. Prior to *The Ten Commandments*' opening scene, he appears on screen to lecture the audience on its message, stating:

> The theme of this picture is whether men are to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today.[36]

Melani McAlister regards this as: "a comment on the contemporary struggle by Americans against what DeMille had in other venues referred to as 'Red Facism' – totalitarianism exercised by either the Left or the Right."[37] The film's release coincided with the Suez crisis in 1956, unintentionally mirroring the conflict between Jews and Egyptians. McAlister's identification of DeMille's object of attack as totalitarianism in general rather than solely Communism acknowledges the difficulty in attributing a specific meaning to these films. Richards has likewise noted that cinematic depictions of Rome over the 1950s and 1960s regularly feature iconography more reminiscent of the Nazis in their martial parades, salutes, and eagles than they resemble Communist imagery.[38] Indeed, the problems in interpreting these films and identifying potential allegories, analogies, or allusions is perhaps best illustrated in a short case study surrounding Henry Koster's 1953 film *The Robe*.

A number of academics – including John Belton and Jeffrey Richards – have taken *The Robe*, the first film shot using CinemaScope technology, as a reflection of the infamous trials staged by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that targeted Communist sympathisers in Hollywood.[39] Such readings derive from the film's narrative in which Roman Tribune Marcellus Gallio, who oversaw Christ's crucifixion, is sent back to Jerusalem by the Emperor Tiberius to gather names of adherents to the fledgling Christian religion. Tiberius describes his fear of Christianity "infecting the legions, rotting the empire", and gaining popularity among the plebeians and slaves. Following Tiberius' death, Caligula ascends to the Imperial throne and puts Gallio – now a convert to Christianity – to death for refusing to renounce his religion and give up the names of his fellow believers. HUAC tried a number of Hollywood figures – beginning with the initial 'Hollywood Ten' in 1947 – and encouraged witnesses to 'name names' of further Communist sympathisers.[40] Those believed to show allegiance to the Communist party

were then ‘blacklisted’ by the major studios in a decree known as the ‘Waldorf Statement’, whereby blacklisted figures were refused pay and employment in Hollywood.[41]

The ancient world epic has had a particular affinity with this period of American history, influencing the preponderance of allegorical interpretations attributed to the genre. For example, Robert Rossen, the writer-director of *Alexander the Great* (1956), was initially blacklisted in 1951 until in 1953 he named 57 Hollywood figures with Communist connections. Dalton Trumbo was blacklisted in 1947, but continued to write pseudonymously until his work on *Spartacus* effectively ended the blacklist when producer-star Kirk Douglas insisted on Trumbo’s name being included in the credits. While the final script of *The Robe* was authored by Philip Dunne, a noted liberal who spoke out against the HUAC hearings, his screenplay redrafted an original by Albert Maltz (itself adapted from the source novel by Lloyd Douglas) who finished his draft a year before he was blacklisted in 1947 as part of the original Hollywood Ten.

The political affiliations of its authors would appear to support readings of *The Robe* as an allegory for HUAC’s persecution of a person’s freedom of political allegiance. Jeff Smith, however, has sought to challenge these ‘zeitgeist’ readings.[42] He argues that Tiberius’ desire for ‘names’ originated in Maltz’s draft, which predates the HUAC trials and blacklisting.[43] Therefore, while the film may have reflected the developing ‘Red Scare’ in America, specific allusion to the trials is highly debatable. For Smith, ‘zeitgeist’ readings also ignore alternate allegorical interpretations, such as reading *The Robe* as criticising the treatment of Communists by Mussolini’s regime during WWII – a theme that would occur in Maltz’s subsequent work.[44] Smith proposes that other details in *The Robe* also predate the HUAC trials as they derive from Douglas’ source novel, while Dunne’s redraft omits a number of details that would have actually made the film a clearer analogy.[45] Ultimately, Smith cites the “problem of revision” as an impasse from which one cannot state with any certainty where specific details originated and how they were intended to be read.[46] Indeed, Dunne’s later interest in making “another *The Robe*” by adapting George Orwell’s infamous Communist critique *1984* could suggest *The Robe* is a film about America’s war against Communism, in which Rome

represents Soviet Russia rather than a self-reflexive analogue for contemporary America.[47] Here Smith turns his attention to reception theory, citing the work of Janet Staiger in considering the value of assessing multiple interpretations of a film.[48] He states that allegorical interpretations of *The Robe* have been retrospectively applied whereas critical reception at the time did not acknowledge such readings: instead, the film's introduction of CinemaScope technology dominated its marketing and critical response.[49] While elements of Smith's argument rely on hypothesis based on the available information, he concludes not by attempting to prove a specific interpretation of the *The Robe*, but by disproving the suggestion that there is a specific interpretation:

> By equating Rome's persecution of Christians with a more generalized notion of political repression, Maltz's dramatic concept was flexible and capacious enough to support myriad readings depending on who one identifies as oppressor and oppressed.[50]

Smith's approach to *The Robe* has formed the basis of this thesis' methodology. I do not intend to argue that the films discussed in the following pages are unequivocally allegorical responses to post-9/11 society in America. Rather, I adopt Smith's 'text-context' model because, in his words:

> 1) It is the only model that explains … allegorical meanings within its shifting historical relations.
> 2) It is the only model broad enough to encompass issues both of authorial intention and of historical reception.[51]

This approach is not without flaws, as Smith accepts that authorial intention can rarely be verified (if, indeed, a film be attributed to an author). However, he reasons that we can balance the available information regarding a filmmaker's intentions with audience reception, although "neither should be viewed as wholly determinate factors in a film's allegorical meaning."[52] While some may be dismissive of using reviews and articles from newspapers, magazines, and websites, it is important to note that, as Barbara Klinger states, these sources have the ability to "define how a film will be perceived in the culture at large."[53] She progresses to suggest that: "reviews are not just pieces of failed criticism, but types of social discourse which, like film advertisements, can aid the researcher in ascertaining the material conditions informing the relation between film and spectator at given moments."[54] As such, my research utilises reviews to assess the evolution of meaning and

interpretation across the current cycle of ancient world epics. By placing each film into its historical context as well as considering the history being depicted and how it was received, I create a 'text-context' model which offers a broad and layered approach to the multivalent works that are the foci of this thesis.

The historical-political landscape in which these films were produced is significant. The ancient world epic dissipated during the 1960s as the result of a confluence of factors: the rising costs of production for Hollywood epics, saturation of the market by low-budget Italian ancient world epics known as *pepla*, and a relaxation of censorship in the US which spurred on a growing youth counter-culture drawn to a new group of filmmakers.[55] The ancient world still found form across the 1970s and 1980s, including in the comedy *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), the television mini-series *Masada* (1981), and the novel adaptation *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Other genres also alluded to the ancient world epic and classical antiquity, such as in the sci-fi epic *Star Wars* (1977) and its sequels. The films of the 1950s-60s cycle were also shown repeatedly on television; even today Easter or Christmas will usually be marked by an afternoon screening of *Ben-Hur*. However, the 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in the mainstream historical epic, with releases including *Dances With Wolves* (1990), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Braveheart* (1995), *Titanic* (1997), and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) paving the way for *Gladiator* in 2000. James Russell believes this cycle is the product of a group of filmmakers, including Kevin Costner, Steven Spielberg, Mel Gibson, and James Cameron, whose identities were shaped as members of the post-WWII 'baby boom'.[56] Russell argues that these filmmakers were childhood witnesses to the epics of the 1950s-60s, and during the 1990s reached the age where many had become fathers and were revisiting the genres of their own youth out of a sense of nostalgia.[57] Indeed, some cited their own experiences of seeing epics as children while promoting their films: for example, after a student was thrown out of a screening of *Schindler's List* for laughing, Spielberg compared the incident to his own experience of being thrown out of *Ben-Hur* as a child.[58] Similarly, Gibson cited *Braveheart* as a "natural successor" to *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*, and later, while promoting *The Passion of the Christ*, punned that audiences may have "*Ben-Hur* before".[59]

While the majority of historical epics released during the 1990s were aimed at teen and adult audiences, the ancient world epic began to makes its return among works aimed at younger audiences, including Disney's animated adventure *Hercules*, the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999), and its spin-off *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001). However, the ancient world epic would fully return to cinema screens with the release of *Gladiator* in 2000. Scott's epic is heavily influenced by its generic predecessors, most notably *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) and *Spartacus*, to which its narrative and characters owe a significant debt. Nevertheless, *Gladiator* arguably became a 'zeitgeist' film, and its influence on subsequent ancient world epics is evident throughout this thesis. Oliver Stone, the director of *Alexander* (2004), has noted that after a long period of gestation his film was finally moved into production because: "*Gladiator* made it possible. The film was such a…deservedly successful international hit it helped all ancient epics to be reborn as a genre."[60] However, the pre-9/11 world in which *Gladiator* was produced and released differs to that of its successors. As Russell states: "the epics made to capitalise on *Gladiator*'s success were produced and released during a period of far greater political turmoil…[9/11] ushered in an ever-worsening climate of international ill will, distrust and opposition."[61] The acts of terrorism perpetrated on September 11th 2001 became a catalyst for the US invasion of Afghanistan later that year, the beginning of the War on Terror, and later the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Scholars have since discussed the influence of 9/11 and the subsequent conflicts on American cinema, with particular interest in the changes the events wrought on the thriller and horror genres. Throughout this thesis, therefore, the dual influences of *Gladiator*'s success and the events of 9/11 and its aftermath will be considered in relation to the continued evolution of the ancient world epic. Writing in 2007, Russell offered a cursory analysis of the cycle, stating that:

> we should not assume that this recent subcycle of epics are entirely coherent or profound critiques of American foreign policy. Most are loosely critical of 'interventionism' in a general sense, but they also all seem to justify the ideals behind military actions, even if the action itself is presented as pointless or malign.[62]

While an astute interpretation of the cycle at that time, I disagree with Russell's suggestion that the current cycle justifies military actions in all cases. Conflict and warfare in the aftermath of 9/11 have been ongoing

concerns affecting many nations, and in turn has influenced the evolution of the combat film, including a series of films depicting the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. In this thesis, I explore the ways in which the ancient world epic has merged with the combat film its portrayal of warfare. This analysis is integral to appreciating how the current cycle of ancient world epics engage with the period in which they were made.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT In order to discuss this cycle's relationship to contemporaneous events it is first necessary to establish some key terms and contexts for this study. I will often refer to America's relationship with the Middle East and the conflicts that have dominated much of the 21st Century; namely the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the more ambiguous construct that is the War on Terror that followed 9/11. A number of terms employed in discussing these topics – such as 'Middle East' – could be challenged and debated by others depending on how they define them and why. In some cases, general terms are used for the sake of consistency and clarity, as otherwise extensive digressions and footnotes would be required to further define specific words or phrases. However, I will outline here the key definitions of some significant terms. First, Jillian Schwedler has defined the term 'Middle East' – itself a European term originating in the early twentieth century – as most commonly encapsulating "those countries that are members of the League of Arab States, plus Israel (with its Jewish and Arab population), and the non-Arab countries of Turkey and Iran (both of which also have small Arab populations)."[63] Schwedler explains that the region is essentially divided into three sub-regions: North Africa (which includes Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia), the Fertile Crescent (including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, parts of Turkey, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), and the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula (including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, and the non-Arab, Persian State of Iran).[64] However, other states which could – and often appear to – be included in the blanket term 'Middle East', such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, have different histories and cultural identities to other 'Middle Eastern' countries. They could therefore be classed as 'Central Asian' states, which could in turn also include Turkey, Iran, Iraq and

Turkmenistan, rather than being termed ‘Middle Eastern’ states.[65] However, Schwedler argues in favour of using the term ‘Middle East’ to include these states, given their “shared historical experiences of the spread of Islam, the reach of the Ottoman Empire, and the experiences of European colonialism.”[66] Furthermore, for this thesis, the history of the region is further complicated by the various periods covered in the films, from the Persian Empire under Xerxes in *300* to the empire shaped by the eponymous *Alexander*, and later to the Roman Empire in *The Passion of the Christ* and *Agora* (2009). As such, I will use ‘Middle East’ to describe the geographical region which has dominated American foreign policy since 9/11 through connections to war, terrorism, oil interests, or international relations. Principal entities include Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, but surrounding countries such as Syria, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are likewise affected by their neighbours. My use of Middle East will therefore include these countries unless otherwise specified.

In Chapter Four, this thesis will also look at the issue of religion during post 9/11 relations between the US and the Middle East, an area with a predominant but not exclusively Muslim population. Again, as Schewdler states, the nomenclature ‘Islamic world’ is somewhat misjudged, as there are a range of religions in the area and only a fraction of the world’s Islamic population resides in that region.[67] As such, I will refrain from using religion as a signifier of the region, but rather employ the term ‘Middle East’ to refer to the region as a whole – including the three subdivisions listed by Schwedler – and where appropriate distinguish either specific countries or groupings.

Details of the 9/11 attacks need not be reproduced here. The two major wars which resulted from these attacks will, however, play a significant part in this thesis and I will therefore run through some key aspects of them. The Bush administration retaliated to the attacks of 9/11 by invading Afghanistan in October 2001, primarily through a combination of aerial strikes and assistance from indigenous ground forces. [68] Despite the target being an organisation located within that territory, the Bush administration associated the Taliban and Al Qaeda with Afghanistan as a whole, refiguring the conflict as a war between nations, like WWII. This was furthered through comparisons the administration made between 9/11 and Pearl Harbor. Indeed, on November

1st 2001 Donald Rumsfeld cited the attacks on Pearl Harbor and the retaliatory Doolittle Raids as an analogy for 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan.[69] However, despite American efforts in Afghanistan the lack of identifiable successes resulting from military action led pundits in *Newsweek* and *The New York Times* to liken the first month of the conflict with the 'quagmire' of Vietnam.[70] The conflict is currently ongoing.

In 2003, Iraq was invaded because it was believed to support acts of terrorism, possibly including those of 9/11. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein's failure to adequately comply with UN weapons inspections was deemed as evidence of his possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), presenting a potential threat to the US and UK, and so on March 20th 2003 a "Coalition of the Willing" consisting of 40 nations entered the country and, by April 9th, had driven the regime from power.[71] Although the operation was militarily a success, the subsequent occupation of the country has been problematic. In the aftermath of the invasion, the Coalition – led by the US – was unable to quickly install a new government and provide the various resources the Iraqi people required, including electricity, gasoline, food and medicine.[72] Deborah Gerner and Philip Schrodt have argued that the initial invasion and occupation of Iraq was conducted by an inadequate number of troops to effectively enforce order and stability in the country following the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime.[73] Mary Ann Tétreault has similarly blamed the levels of instability on a series of actions taken by the occupying forces:

> The violent implosion of Iraq was hastened by ill-conceived policies such as excluding Baath party members from jobs, disbanding the 300,000-strong Iraqi army, and failing to sequester arms and weapons located in dumps all over the country and in the hands of the disbanded soldiers.[74]

Continued fighting in locations such as Fallujah, Ramadi, and Sadr City resulted in heavy civilian casualties as well as climbing American casualty figures.[75] Goldschmidt has argued that this escalating violence and the revelations of American-perpetrated prisoner abuse at sites such as Abu Ghraib discredited the war for many Americans.[76] What originated as an aggressive, forward moving action descended into a prolonged period of occupation, as David Ryan has summarised:

> Beyond regime change there was little positive planning for the post-war period. The specific military mission and its objectives were achieved with relative ease. The broader objectives relating to the stabilisation of Iraq let alone those of the war on terrorism remained vague, undefined and therefore difficult to achieve.[77]

David Altheide has written critically of the invasion of Iraq and the War on Terror, arguing that many members of what would become the Bush administration – including Colin Powell, Paul Wolfowitz, and Dick Cheney – were involved in the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), which laid out a plan for regime change in Iraq originating ten years before the 2003 invasion.[78] He believes the invasion was ultimately part of a wider plan for the US to become a hegemonic power on the global stage, quoting David Armstrong's 2002 essay in *Harper's* in which he states:

> The plan is for the United States to take over the world. The overt theme is unilateralism, but it is ultimately a story of domination. It calls for the United States to maintain its overwhelming military superiority and prevent new rivals from rising up to challenge it on the world stage. It calls for dominion over friends and enemies alike. It says not that the United States must be more powerful, or most powerful, but that it must be absolutely powerful.[79]

Whether Bush's foreign policy has resulted in a form of American imperialism is debatable, but these questions pervade the current cycle of ancient world epics. They variously depict the Persian, Macedonian, and Roman empires, and the motifs of invasion, occupation, resistance and imperialism recur throughout a number of the films. The manner in which these civilisations and their wars are depicted forms the basis of my exploration of allegory and analogy in the genre.

ALLEGORY, ANALOGY, AND ALLUSION This thesis is predicated on the ability to identify potential allegorical and analogous material in the ancient world epic. In order to utilise these terms it is important to establish a basic comprehension of their meaning, how they have been associated with the ancient world epic, and why a study such as this is relevant to the current cycle. As discussed above, allegorical and analogous interpretations of ancient world epics evolved over the twentieth century, and prior to this current cycle the last major period of production was that of the 1950s-60s. The films of that era were created against a social backdrop influenced by American prosperity following the events of WWII, the defeat of fascist empires, and the instigation of the Cold War. For some critics, the events of

9/11, the War on Terror, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have replicated many of the social and political conditions in which the previous cycle existed. Burgoyne, for instance, has argued that in the aftermath of WWII and 9/11 America has displayed a preoccupation with "American exceptionalism", which informs the dichotomies of 'Us' and 'Them' that permeate the political rhetoric of WWII, the Cold War, and the War on Terror.[80] David Ryan has similarly discussed exceptionalism in the rhetoric of George W. Bush, citing one of the President's speeches to Congress following 9/11 in which he stated:

> Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. … This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom."[81]

Despite the speech referring to 'the world' and 'civilisation', the speech is clearly positioning America as the exemplar of the values he lists and differentiating the country from its enemies. Frank Krutnik et al. have compared the Bush Administration to HUAC during the 1940s and 1950s, arguing that after 9/11 it revived the concept of 'Un-Americanism' for those who opposed its actions.[82] It is perhaps significant, then, that a genre cycle contemporary with the HUAC hearings and early decades of the Cold War has resurfaced during the initial decade of the War on Terror and the ensuing conflicts. While this may be synchronicity, it begs the question as to whether the current cycle of ancient world epics could be read allegorically in the same manner as *The Robe* and its contemporaries.

Smith draws on the work of Ismail Xavier to inform his analysis of allegory in *The Robe*. Xavier defines allegory as embodying "a concept, an idea, or a moral" concealed within a text.[83] Allegory's ability to conceal or hide meaning in subtext has, Xavier argues, enabled the device to take on special significance during periods in which authoritarian powers exert control over the dissemination of images, texts, and other forms of expression.[84] It allows messages to be transmitted to a particular audience while those who may oppose the message are either unaware of or unable to prove its presence within the text. However, in order for the message to be understood it requires a form of mutual awareness and comprehension from both author and reader. Daniel Herbert has noted that analysis of allegories is therefore problematical,

namely identifying "whether *texts* are allegorical or whether texts become so through allegorical *interpretation*."[85] Xavier concurs, identifying the dichotomy between allegory as the product of either the writer or the reader and differentiating them as 'intentional allegories' and 'unintentional allegories', respectively.[86] Allegory therefore corresponds with Barbara Klinger's summation of how meaning is created in cinema, in that it requires "chemistry between authorial intentions and the critic's agenda."[87] The multiple interpretations of ancient world epics cited above illustrate this.

The issue remains, however, as to who the intended audience for an allegory is and how they will recognise its subtext. One could regard this process as 'Reception', but as Marnie Hughes-Warrington argues: "'Reception' is perhaps not the best description for film-watching activities, for viewers are not simply the receivers or consumers of films, but agents who draw films into their lives and use them to their own ends."[88] Nevertheless, examination of how a film is received and utilised is important in understanding which themes, characters or events resonated with audiences at a particular time. Burgoyne, for instance, refers to a shared American experience of 9/11 in which iconography from *Gladiator*, including Maximus' iconic helmet and his motto, "Strength and Honour", were appropriated in imagery commemorating fallen firefighters and in tattoos. Burgoyne argues that this is:

> …one of the ways that *Gladiator* has been connected to a powerful and particular moment of national anxiety and trauma, to a changing concept of nation, and to surprising acts of solidarity with the past. The relationship between commemoration, collective mourning, and body modification, including tattooing and scarification, circulating within the cultural responses to *Gladiator*, suggests that the imagery and narrative messages of the contemporary epic are open to appropriation in ways that are not limited by nationalistic or imperialistic expressions, but rather may serve different, vernacular needs.[89]

Essentially, people can share an experience but will not all respond to or interpret the experience in the same way. Indeed, whether a mass of people can share a particular emotion, feeling or reaction has inspired discussions on memory and reception. The concept of 'trauma' has been explored in the wake of 9/11 and other recent tragedies, with Burgoyne suggesting that video replays of disasters in news broadcasts: "speak not to the collapse of signifying capacity but rather to the deep connection between saturation media coverage and cultural trauma."[90] To some extent this converges with Alison Landsberg's theory of 'prosthetic memory', whereby:

> an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history… In the process that I am describing, the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live.

In so doing, she argues those who witnessed an event such as 9/11 on television, in documentaries, books, newspapers and subsequent narrative films can then recall those images and the emotions they evoked as a personal memory of that experience. If true, then mass audiences, such as the American cinema-going audience, are primed to identify allusions, analogies, or allegorical sub-texts to events such as 9/11 in mainstream films.

However, such a conclusion could lead a study such as this to identify a series of films as what David Bordwell has called 'Zeitgeist' cinema: films which reflect a national psyche through allusion to current debates and issues.[91] Bordwell is highly critical of this reflectionist perspective, contending that a large and diverse population such as America cannot share a psyche or the same anxieties, and concluding that films do not encapsulate a nation's anxieties, only those of a select few individuals. This may include the filmmakers themselves, as Bordwell acknowledges that while they may engage with contemporary issues in their work they are only reflecting the 'Zeitgeist' as they conceive it. Marnie Hughes-Warrington, mindful of how films can be used for propaganda as well as entertainment, concurs:

> Talk of communities as remembering, visualising, suffering from trauma or being in a state of denial is at best metaphorical…we cannot assume that viewers of a film form a cohesive interpretive community and that they will use a text for the same ends.[92]

Bordwell also bemoans how reflectionism is employed by certain critics, noting their tendency to select films which support their analysis while omitting those which are incompatible. He argues that:

> reflectionist criticism throws out loose and intuitive connections between film and society without offering concrete explanations that can be argued explicitly. It relies on spurious and far-fetched correlations between films and social or political events. It neglects damaging counterexamples. It assumes that popular culture is the audience talking to itself, without interference or distortion from the makers and the social institutions they inhabit.[93]

While a select group of films feature in this thesis their selection was motivated not by a desire for a reflectionist conclusion, but rather the genre to which the films belong. Each film is analysed individually using a multivalent approach, before it is placed within the wider contexts of genre and the filmmakers' bodies of work. Rather than offering a straightforward conclusion

that these films reflect the national psyche in post 9/11 America, I aim to explore the ways in which the films utilise the conventions of genre – often hybridising the ancient world epic with the tropes of other genres – and allude to contemporary events to engage with audiences. Bordwell terms this process 'refraction':

> the bending and reconfiguring of social themes under the pressure of filmmaking traditions. We understand mass-market films better when we see them as, sometimes opportunistically, grabbing material from the wider culture (whether that material reflects mass sentiment or not) and transforming it through narrative and stylistic conventions.[94]

The narrative and stylistic conventions of the ancient world epic will be established and explored through their appropriation of aspects of other genres, allusions to contemporary events, and approaches to aesthetic, wherein I will examine how these areas affect the meaning of these films.

While allegories are often more general, moral points, more specific similarities between a film's narrative and an event may come in the form of an analogy. Analogies are simplified stories designed to correspond with a similar story or situation to aid in understanding its complexities. Xavier has noted that there may be multiple analogies within a single work, whereby they combine to support an allegory.[95] For example, one could regard Imperial Rome in *Quo Vadis* as an analogy for Nazi Germany, Nero as an analogy for Hitler, and the Christians as an analogue for the Allies. This interpretation could then lead the viewer to identify the film as an allegory for the threat of totalitarianism, while simultaneously aggrandising Christianity in opposition to it. Allegory and analogy are not, however, limited to narrative factors. Xavier has argued that both devices can be found in the *mise-en-scène*, soundtrack, editing and other component parts which combine to create a film.[96] This is particularly significant for historical films, as the choice of period, costumes, *mise-en-scène* and so forth can influence how audiences interpret their content – particularly as some periods or cultures carry certain connotations of meaning. David Eldridge has cited this in his description of 'usable pasts', whereby a particular period of history is adopted by the filmmaker to suit the message they wish to convey rather than to recount a specific historical event.[97] Wyke reiterates this conclusion, while Elley similarly states:

> Each period has its own rules and call-signs, and audiences have learnt to recognise these over the years: basic manners, attitudes and speech persist from film to film,

> the realities of dress, behaviour, and make-up in ancient times reflect a film's own era as much as its story's, and history and fact are adopted to accommodate current taste and its receptiveness to allegory.[98]

The films in this thesis are, to a large extent, 'usable pasts' with which to engage with the social and political circumstances that followed 9/11. As I have mentioned, their themes include imperialism, Christianity, warfare between nations, occupation of a foreign country, torture, acts of terrorism, guerrilla warfare, cultural identity, masculinity, and national exceptionalism. While the films varied in their commercial success, they generally fared better at the US and foreign box office than films which directly depicted the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts, such as *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Battle for Haditha* (2007), and *Redacted* (2007).[99] Where these ancient world epics hold potential as allegories, then, is in their ability to disguise political comment in the *mise-en-scène* and narratives of the ancient world. The message of the film therefore becomes slightly ambiguous, which Richard Maltby has identified as a common factor in Hollywood's approach to political messages. He states:

> Hollywood's politics are so equivocal because Hollywood's commercial interests are best satisfied by maximising its audience and allowing for the unpredictable satisfactions of specific audience members. In that sense any movie is an infinitely open text, a showcase of endless incidental pleasures encouraging, rather than repressing, consumer choice. The political process in the cinema is finally constructed by the audience's engagement, as consumers, with movie texts designed to accommodate their consumers' desires for meaning and likely to allow those meanings to be discovered wherever viewers (including critics) choose to look.[100]

Michael Wood is also sceptical of the notion that epics may contain material specific to the period in which they were made, as he believes that the genre's trope of depicting a disenfranchised group suffering persecution from an oppressive power is essentially an archetype of American storytelling. For Wood, this narrative is: "the colonies against the mean mother country…it seems natural that American moviemakers should, no doubt unconsciously, fall back on a popular version of their country's birth."[101] While his argument predates the current cycle of epics, it could nevertheless be applied to some of the films discussed in this thesis and challenges reflectionist readings of the texts.

Furthermore, as Rosenstone argued, historical films can sometimes engage purely with the history they depict rather than attempting to contain contemporary relevance. By layering historical information and detail they

dispel allegorical or analogous readings in a process Herbert defines as 'anti-allegory':

> To be anti-allegorical, then, is to seek a very close proximity between representation and a single meaning. In interpretive practice, it is to short-circuit interpretations of a text's possible secondary meanings, generally through the eradication of latent content.[102]

He exemplifies this with the HBO television series *The Wire* (2002-2008), a dense and complex depiction of the widespread effects of crime in contemporary Baltimore. While the concept of anti-allegory is not typically associated with studies of ancient world epics, W.V. Harris has nevertheless argued that potential pro-Communist messages in *Spartacus* – one of the most extensively cited allegorical texts of the previous epic cycle – was "so muffled by the immense remoteness of ancient Rome they could hardly have aroused revolutionary passions [in viewers]."[103] I shall therefore assess the use of historical detail, narrative structuring, and spectacle in these films as potential methods of creating anti-allegorical texts.

For some, such as John Tuska, the study of allegory in film is a fruitless venture altogether. In his study of the western genre, he concludes that allegorical interpretations cannot be verified, are highly subjective, and ultimately the viewer can only either "agree or disagree; beyond that, they have no real function and offer no real insight."[104] Tuska is unfairly derogatory in his appraisal. Analysis of allegory (and analogy) is not a pursuit of a specific, 'verifiable' interpretation. Studies such as mine aim to explore how a text engages with the period in which it is made as well as its historical precedents. While interpretations of a text can either be critiqued or supported, they are not absolute and – as with the case study of *The Robe* – may be furthered or criticised in future studies as part of a wider academic dialogue.

In this process of analysis and suggestion of meaning, it is therefore important to identify instances of intertextual and social allusion. Noël Carroll has discussed the growth of allusion in cinema during the 1970s and 1980s, whereby cine-literate filmmakers would reference other films within their work. This could be in the form of a specific shot or editing sequence, reflected in lighting, set design, or even dialogue.[105] Certain viewers – what Carroll calls

"informed viewers" – could then identify these allusions and recall the films to which they allude."[106] As he states:

> At many late-seventies premieres, one frequently had the feeling of watching two films simultaneously. There was the genre film pure and simple, and there was also the art film in the genre film, which through its systems of allusions sent an esoteric meaning to film-literate exegetes…It seems that popular cinema wants to remain popular by developing a two-tiered system of communication which sends an action/drama/fantasy-packed message to one segment of the audience and an additional hermetic, camouflaged, and recondite one to another.[107]

Allusions may not necessarily be to other films, and could equally refer to contemporary events or moments in history which share similar imagery or themes. In so doing, a film may suggest that history is repeating itself, or evoke an emotional reaction to the diegetic events of the film that is similar to an audiences' experience of a non-diegetic event. A string of allusions could therefore combine to create an analogy, a series of which could then provide greater weight to an allegorical interpretation of a text. Identification of allusions to contemporary events, other ancient world epics, and other genres will become commonplace throughout this thesis.

GENRE While the titular focus of this thesis is allegorical and analogous readings of ancient world epics, the significance of genre to this analysis evolved and expanded over time. Initial investigation into the ancient world epic, especially the 1950s-60s cycle, aided in establishing the narrative and thematic tropes of the genre and its recurrent aesthetic traits. It also assisted in recognising how the current cycle has occasionally adhered to this model while in others it has deviated. In the latter case, the deviations largely derive from the influence of other genres which have been amalgamated with the ancient world epic. The effects of this genre hybridity have been revelatory in analysing allegorical or analogous interpretations of the texts, as well as exemplifying the intertextuality of these films through allusions to other works.

However, genre identification and definition is a complex issue. It is not uncommon to find scholarly works on 'historical films' or 'epic' cinema devoting lengthy passages in their introductions to how the authors believe the terms should be defined and utilised. While this thesis falls into that trap out of necessity, I will attempt to keep the discussion succinct. Broadly

speaking, I am concerned with the study of 'epics', or what could be called 'historical epics'. As some films in this thesis depict fictional stories and fantastical myths, I prefer to use the broader term 'epic', as it avoids lengthy digressions and qualifiers as to what counts as 'historical'. However, 'epic' alone is a broad and encompassing term, the meaning of which Joanna Paul has called "shifting and elusive".[108] Steve Neale has noted that the marketing of films as 'epics' rose in prominence during the 1950s and 1960s, where it was used interchangeably to describe both large-scale productions as well as films set in the ancient world.[109] He adds that epics often shared thematic tropes, namely a "concern with political and military power…where it found articulation on national, international and sometimes global and cosmic scales."[110] As will be discussed, the films of the current cycle are largely set against a backdrop of conflict – between nations, cultures, or men and gods – and imperialism, and as such conform to Neale's definition of epic. Scope is also a recurrent theme in defining the form: Vivian Sobchack has summarised the epic as a "spectatorial invitation to indulge in wantonly expansive, hyperbolic, even hysterical acts of cinema", while Stubbs regards epic films as synonymous with spectacle in their "staging of momentous events on a large scale."[111] Paul refines this in her definition of an epic as: "a mainstream film, large scale in both production values and budget, set in antiquity, with a historical or mythological narrative (or both)."[112] My own definition largely concurs with Paul's, with the proviso that I discount budget as a specific indicator of whether a film is an epic. From an industry perspective, budgets are not always accurately advertised, nor are they necessarily reflective of the size of a film. Indeed, relatively small scale films may have large budgets depending on the expense of their cast, marketing, or other factors. Furthermore, how a viewer defines 'spectacle' can vary: for example, as much has been written about the 'spectacle' of the human body or the 'epic' qualities of a landscape as about the recreation of ancient cities or battles involving thousands of extras or costly CGI. Certain films in this thesis are comparatively small in budget compared to others but could nonetheless be termed epic; *Centurion* (2010), for instance, reportedly cost $12 million whereas *Troy* (2004) cost $175m, but both are set in the ancient world, both utilise sweeping wide-shots of landscapes, and both include battles between what appears to be thousands of combatants. In such cases, Russell has

argued that one must also consider how a film is marketed, discussed by its makers, and received by an audience – suggestions adhered to by this thesis.[113] A prime example offered by Russell is *Dances With Wolves* (1990), which was a relatively low-budget film ($22 million), but as its distributors perceived there to be audience animosity towards the western genre the film was marketed foremost as an 'epic', or at the least as an 'epic western'.[114]

While 'epic' usefully encapsulates a broad range of films including those set in antiquity, Hughes-Warrington has noted that identifying a film as an 'epic' or a 'historical drama' is complicated by the range of sub-genres and divisions scholars, critics and publicity teams create, and how these evolve over time.[115] For example, one often-cited sub-genre of the 'epic' is the 'biblical epic', which Babington and Evans' subdivide further into the 'Old Testament Epic', the 'Roman/Christian Epic' and the 'Christ Film'.[116] In *Big Screen Rome*, Cyrino refers to Roman epics as the 'toga film', a term also employed by William Fitzgerald to describe Roman epics.[117] Conversely, *American Cinematographer*'s Debra Kaufman cites the Roman epic *Gladiator* as "reinventing the 'sword-and-sandal genre'".[118] Furthermore, in Leon Hunt's essay on masculinity in epic films he defines *Spartacus* and *El Cid* (1961) as 'male epics', differentiating them from the more general 'epic'.[119] Therefore, in Chapter Four of this thesis, I could describe *The Passion of the Christ* as an 'ancient historical biblical Christ-film sword-and-sandal male toga epic'. To avoid such absurdities I have settled on defining the films discussed by this thesis simply as 'ancient world epics'. This nomenclature acknowledges the general era in which the films are set, and is inclusive to those depicting historical events, mythology, and those liminal examples which encompass aspects of both, such as *The Passion of the Christ*. While I occasionally group specific films in this thesis under a heading – such as 'Roman-Britain films' – this is not an attempt to introduce a new sub-genre of films but simply to clarify to which films I am referring in making a particular point.

My approach to genre takes as its starting point Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic approach.[120] Altman argues that genres continually evolve and change, often operating as cycles rather than a continual model.[121] His argument in favour of a diachronic assessment is fitting for application to the ancient world epic: a film genre originating in the early 1900s which often

adapted plays and novels from the previous century, or events and scripture dating back thousands of years. While many of the semantic elements of the ancient world epic – such as costumes, props, sets, and iconography – were present in films produced over the first half of the 20th century, the 1950s-60s cycle arguably secured the genre's syntactic features over a relatively concise period of time and production. Ancient world epics from this period would typically involve a disenfranchised group (e.g. slaves, Christians, Jews, subjects of an occupied country) who are persecuted by an imperial, tyrannical, totalitarian regime (e.g. Persian or Roman Empire), within which a hero undergoes a transformation and rejects the oppressive regime and its ideology. *Gladiator* largely continued the semantic and syntactic elements of the genre established by the previous cycle, subtly updating some aspects to suit contemporary audiences. However, while subsequent releases have similarly maintained elements of the ancient world epic's generic tropes, they have often hybridised these with elements from other genres; most notably the combat film, comic book movie, western, and horror film. This is not unusual, as Altman states: "It is simply not possible to describe Hollywood cinema accurately without the ability to account for the numerous films that innovate by combining the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another."[122] As Jim Kitses agues:

> The implication is that the industry develops cycles of popular film in a continuous process of reading and answering audience needs and trends, and that at any given moment genre has less to do with a prototype, which in any case is the construction of critics, than with market forces.[123]

Gladiator could be considered the urtext of this current cycle, and through analysis of the films contained in this thesis one can observe which characters, themes, and devices in the film – and the genre at large – appear to resonate with audiences through their repetition and emulation in subsequent works.

It is perhaps worth reiterating that, while I occasionally refer to the ways in which the films deviate from historical sources, I do not judge the value of the films based on their historical 'accuracy'. Historical films are regularly 'inaccurate', but this is rarely due to ignorance on the part of the filmmakers. As Rosenstone has argued, successful adaptations of history to film often require a series of inventions, displacements, alterations and compressions to

make the history comprehensible and dramatically engaging for viewers unfamiliar with the period being depicted.[124] Blanshard and Shahabudin also argue that the aims of filmmakers differ to those of a historian and therefore cannot be judged in the same manner, while promotion of a film as being based on history is a tool with which to encourage suspension of disbelief among viewers.[125] Sorlin has more succinctly stated that academics who complain about historical inaccuracies are "worrying about a meaningless question."[126] Conversely, it is not uncommon to read reviews by film critics complaining about a film's historical inaccuracies while they state in an authoritative manner what the 'correct' historical fact is – facts which are often, ironically, inaccurate. Jeremy Purves has complained of this issue in his survey of critical reactions to *Troy*:

> What surprised me was the discovery, upon reading review after review of *Troy*, that so great a number of professionally published reviews manifested an inability to appreciate or understand the original source. In fact, it became clear that many of *Troy*'s critics had appeared to never have read the *Iliad*.[127]

While historical context is only one small factor in my assessment of ancient world epics, I nevertheless maintain an awareness of the history being depicted and how it may have influenced the filmmakers and our interpretations of the films. This thesis covers films depicting a period of history covering approximately 1,500 years with myriad different cultures, events, and mythological or supernatural features. Nevertheless, they essentially fall into two basic categories which I will use for the sake of clarity: Greek epics and Roman epics. In making this distinction it allows for the identification of various motifs associated with each culture and setting – motifs which were present in the 1950s-60s cycle and are either continued or developed in this current cycle.

During the 1950s-60s Hollywood typically favoured Roman epics over those set in ancient Greece, but by contrast the recent cycle has seen a preponderance of Greek epics. Gideon Nisbet suggests that this may be due to Greece lacking the visual signifiers that create a defined *mise-en-scène*, and more significantly its iconography is commonly associated with athletics and philosophy rather than the blood, action, debauchery, politics and power associated with Rome.[128] He also cites the social geography of Greece as practically impenetrable for lay audiences, while cinema's Rome frequently

(and misleadingly) simplifies its constitution down to an all-powerful emperor who dominates the senate. Greece consisted of a multitude of culturally diverse city-states (*poleis*) with complex and varied political systems, alliances, and rivalries: relationships that would take time to explain if the filmmaker intended to make an attempt at historical 'accuracy'.[129] Finally, Nisbet suggests that ancient Greece has connotations as a culture in which 'homosexuality' (to use a generalised modern term) was prevalent; the Greco custom of pederasty was even referred to by the Romans as 'Greek Love'.[130] Sodomy laws did not begin to change in America until the 1960s, meaning overt depiction of homosexual relationships in the 1950s-60s cycle was practically non-existent (but is implied in places). Yet, even today homophobia still exists. Indeed, Oliver Stone claims that homophobia among US audiences damaged the financial and critical success of *Alexander*.[131] The issue with Greek epics is therefore not only avoiding direct portrayals of homosexual or bisexual characters but, as Blanshard and Shahabudin note, "widespread knowledge about Greek homosexuality ensures that every sign of male intimacy and friendship is potentially miscoded."[132]

Cinema's Rome does not share the same issues. It does, however, have a significant, complex historical relationship to America. During the War of Independence colonial rhetoric equated Britain with Imperial Rome, as both were regarded as totalitarian regimes. Following the war, though, America utilised elements of Republican Rome, such as the duty-based ideology of *romanitas*, architecture, and statuary to create a sense of shared identity and history among its varied states and immigrant communities.[133] A famous example of this is Hartio Greenough's 1840 sculpture of George Washington, depicting him wearing a toga and bearing a Latin inscription.[134] However, as America expanded its frontiers west its parallels to Republican Rome diminished in favour to similarities with Imperial Rome.[135] Despite this, Roman epics regularly condemn imperialism through reference to America's colonial past. The emperor in films set during the Imperial period is conventionally portrayed by a British actor, such as Peter Ustinov as Nero in *Quo Vadis*. Even those set in the Republican period usually found a power-hungry Roman aristocrat with political and military influence to fill a similar role, as with Laurence Olivier's Crassus in *Spartacus*.[136] Wyke has termed the casting

convention of employing theatrically trained British stars to play Roman aristocrats the 'linguistic paradigm', whereby the elite English voices of tyrannical oppressors become synonymous with America's own experience under British Imperialism.[137] This casting would contrast to the heroic lead, which would normally be portrayed by an American retaining his native accent. Not only did this appeal to US history, but it also gained contemporary significance in the wake of WWII, America's role in the victories over Germany and Japan, and the new threat of Soviet Russia. In Roman epics, as Wyke explains: "a hyperbolically tyrannical Rome stands for the decadent European Other forever destined to be defeated by the vigorous Christian principles of democratic America.[138] However, at times one can associate Rome with America itself. In the aforementioned case study of *The Robe*, Richard Burton maintains his British accent as Marcellus, confirming his identity as a Roman among the similarly accented Tiberius and Caligula (the latter played by American actor Jay Robinson). This feature could therefore be used to support an interpretation of the film as a McCarthyist analogy, as Marcellus is shown to be persecuted by his own government.

The bias Hollywood cinema has shown to Rome does not derive purely from its allegorical uses, however. Originating in the early 1900s, numerous films were adapted from popular plays, novels and pyrotechnic productions set in ancient Rome during the Victorian period. Some, such as Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, published in 1880, and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*, first published as a serial in 1895, had sold millions of copies worldwide and so made obvious choices for adaptation. Furthermore, the limitations of the new medium – such as their initial brevity and absence of sound – benefitted from adapting stories of which audiences had prior knowledge. Furthermore, the generalised similarities between the Roman and American systems of government (a single figurehead, an elected senate) are relatively simple for lay audiences to understand compared to the complexities of the Greek systems. It also provides further parallels between Rome and America. Similarly, the Roman love of spectator sports in arenas and circuses creates a parallel to US sports culture and enables audiences to relate to the entertainment on screen; something *Gladiator* explored in depth.

Unlike ancient Greece, Rome can also form the backdrop to stories that foreground New Testament narratives and Christian characters. Safe in the knowledge that their religion would outlast the empire's corruption, Christian audiences in America could simultaneously enjoy an epic film as a morality tale while also revelling in the spectacle of Roman decadence.[139] Orgies, indulgence, and the lure of the arena for chariot racing and gladiatorial blood-sports offered the violence and action that Greece could not. This duality of identification and revulsion has typified cinema's relationship with the setting. As Nisbet summarises: "Rome delivers the ultimate Hollywood combo: Sex *and* the City."[140]

A common motif of these films would see a pagan male, usually belonging to the Roman military on some level, converting to Christianity for the love of a Christian (usually a slave) girl. As Nisbet describes, this convention created sexual tension between the Christian girl and pagan soldier, but her chastity prevented them from acting on their desires. As such, the films did not fall foul of the standards enforced in American cinema during the 1950s and early 1960s.[141] Compared to the homosexual connotations of ancient Greece, this motif gave Roman heroes the appearance of being strictly heterosexual. This narrative convention of the post-war 1950s-60s cycle has also been interpreted by Fitzgerald as containing: "contemporary resonances in the theme of the rough-edged soldier returning from the wars and encountering a self-possessed woman who demands the domestication of his martial instincts."[142] Indeed, we rarely see scenes of warfare in these films, with martial spectacle coming principally through the Triumph: a gaudy parade marking the end of a conflict, such as that seen in the opening scenes of *Quo Vadis*. The rest of the narrative then depicts the soldier falling in love with a woman and moving towards domesticity, as evident in the subplot in *Spartacus* in which the eponymous hero falls in love with Virinia and together they have a son.

Elena Theodorakopoulos has identified a final motif of the Roman epic in which the themes of Christian morality and condemnation of imperialism are enforced in the protagonists "turning their backs, physically or metaphorically, on Rome and its depravity."[143] This may occur through death (*The Robe*, *Spartacus*, *Gladiator*), literally walking away from the city (*The Fall of the*

Roman Empire, *Quo Vadis*), or finding a new life away from Roman rule. In so doing the protagonists perform a final symbolic rejection of Rome's vices and oppressive rule in favour of simple morality and American values: family, religion, and individual freedom. These tropes will reveal themselves across the current cycle of ancient world epics, although in other ways the genre has developed or changed. Of the latter, no feature is more prominent than the greater focus the current cycle gives to scenes of warfare and combat, and it is therefore helpful to outline the evolution of the combat film in order to explore the way it engages with the ancient world epic in the chapters that follow.

THE COMBAT FILM Warfare is an integral part of this thesis' investigation into the ancient world epic, allegory, and analogy. As Russell has acknowledged, a number of post-9/11 epics have "focused quite directly on the politics of empire and historical clashes between East and West".[144] This has also influenced other historical epics, with releases including *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) covering similar themes. However, while these films were large-budget forays into their respective historical periods, they were isolated cases compared to the larger revival of the ancient world epic. The propensity for films set in classical antiquity to utilise the motifs of empire and conflict between nations (especially East and West) has informed many reflectionist readings of the genre. However, warfare was rarely a feature of Hollywood epics in the 1950s-60s cycle. Roman epics, as noted above, focussed predominantly on internal conflict, such as that between Rome and Christianity, or slave revolts, and only occasionally did they feature international conflicts, as seen in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Cleopatra* (1963), and Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961). Hollywood's Greek epics were an exception, as *Alexander the Great*, *Helen of Troy* (1956) and *The 300 Spartans* (1962) each depict scenes of armed conflict resulting from one political power pursuing a policy of imperial expansion – and each has been retold in the current cycle, as *Alexander*, *Troy* and *300*, respectively. Of the other films in this thesis, including the Roman epics, the majority involve warfare between nations, cultures, or in some cases mortals and gods.

In this shift, we also see an element of genre hybridisation between the ancient world epic and the combat film. The two genres are not dissimilar, sharing themes of masculinity and the male body, as well deriving spectacle from scenes of battlefield violence. However, the current ancient world epic cycle's integration of specific details more commonly associated with the combat film is a key site of potential meaning in forming allegorical or analogous interpretations of these films. Foremost among these tropes has been the cycle's use of the 'father figure'. In her study of the WWII combat film, Jeanine Basinger has discussed the evolution of the genre since the beginning of WWII, identifying 1943 as the year in which certain tropes of the genre solidified into the basic model subsequent films would follow.[145] Pat Aufderheide defines these tropes using the example of 1943's *Bataan*, concluding that the typical WWII combat film features: "a group of diverse men, symbolic of America's pluralism, whose individual heroics are dedicated to group survival, whose sacrifices are justified, and whose battles and objectives are clearly defined."[146] Basinger and Lynda Boose both note that this group is typically led by a 'father figure', such as John Wayne's Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), Sergeant Dane in *Bataan*, Sergeant Kinnie in *Battleground* (1949), and Captain Nelson in *Objective Burma* (1945).[147] This slightly older or veteran soldier would take on a patriarchal role in the group and ensure the soldier-sons would perform their duty with a sense of moral integrity and professionalism – even if, as McCrisken and Pepper note in relation to Stryker, he is not always a "flawless" individual himself.[148] While the father figure does not always survive in these films, his influence remains and embodies the patriarchal institutions of government and military that guide and watch over the soldier-sons (some of whom become fathers themselves).

This symbolic representation of the government/military's relationship to its soldiers as a moral guide was particularly applicable during WWII. McCrisken and Pepper have described the conflict as America's 'Good War' as the country was, arguably, morally justified in confronting fascism and imperialism, while the Allied victory instigated a period of economic prosperity in the US.[149] During the post-war years the WWII combat film continued to be produced and although scenes of combat, as Basinger has discussed, grew

comparatively more ‘realistic’ than those produced during the war, the father figure remained in place.[150] The same tropes – along with minor additions such as increased ethnic diversity among the soldiery – were also applied to Korean War films.[151] The lack of development in the genre was, in Basinger’s opinion, due in part to cameras and broadcasting technology causing a delay between war footage being recorded and broadcast.[152] As such, media outlets still relied on the US government to provide footage of the war, which concealed much of the graphic reality of the conflict that films may have emulated. This was to change during the 1960s, however, when the Vietnam War became the first conflict to be extensively televised.[153] Unlike WWII and Korea where combat films were produced while the conflicts were ongoing, the constant coverage of Vietnam on US television negated the need for combat films depicting the war to be made parallel to it.[154] The exception was John Wayne’s *Green Berets* (1968), which essentially repeated the well-known tropes of the WWII film with Wayne once again playing the patriarchal leader.

As the 1960s progressed and the Vietnam War intensified, America’s objectives became less obvious and revelations such as the My Lai massacre threw the war’s morality into question; as Basinger summarises: “there were heroes and villains, but they all seemed to be on the same side”.[155] While few films broached the Vietnam War directly, signs that the conflict was influencing the combat film could be seen in Robert Aldrich’s *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), a film which in his words “turned the war film inside out.”[156] Lee Marvin’s Major Reisman acts as the patriarchal figure to his titular twelve – consisting of murderers, rapists, and condemned men – and largely keeps them in some form of moral order. However, the film’s climax subverts the expectations of American soldiers behaving honourably by depicting the unit complete their mission by murdering a number of unarmed German officers and their partners. This moral ambiguity descended into the degradation of the father figure in the 1970s with the first wave of Vietnam War films. In *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Martin Sheen’s Willard is confronted by the deranged Colonel Kurtz, a father-figure whose Vietnam experience has destroyed his sense of morality. Without a guide, Willard becomes an abandoned soldier-son who also becomes violent and murders Kurtz.

Similarly, in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Coming Home* (1978), the father figure is notably absent and the films portray the soldier-sons as abandoned and either physically or emotionally crippled. McCrisken and Pepper have described this development across the 1970s as evidence that:

> Something of a revolution had taken place in American filmmaking…that challenged old values, traditions and styles while reflecting the self-doubt, alienation, dissolution and confusion that seemed to grip the American psyche in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate.[157]

The Deer Hunter and *Apocalypse Now* paved the way for the 1980s cycle of Vietnam War combat films, including *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Casualties of War* (1989). The soldier-sons of these films are victimised by their environment, by enemy tactics, by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and by their abandonment by the US military and government. This dislocation between youths and the patriarchal institutions that are supposed to watch over them reflects the counter-culture movement of the 1960s-70s. As Aufderheide states:

> Anti-authoritarianism is a strong tradition in American popular culture, but the anti-authoritarianism that suffuses these films is of a special sort. It has nothing to say about authority badly wielded and evidences, instead, a collapse of faith in 'the authorities.' Distrust of politics in general is the corollary to that collapse of faith.[158]

This collapse of faith is encapsulated in the Vietnam combat film by the disappearance of the 'father figure'. Aufderheide has noted that in these films: "The noble grunts are often children…and their vision of the world reflects it. They are often, in fact, abandoned children, with bad or absent fathers."[159] Boose expands on this argument, stating:

> Most of the footage of combat units in Vietnam films suggests a total vacuum of authority. In a film like *Casualties of War* or *Apocalypse Now* or *Full Metal Jacket*, the war is a chaotic moral landscape with no fathers on hand, a war fought by boys led by boys, a space abandoned to the rule of frightened and lethally armed adolescents.[160]

These Vietnam War combat films account for the atrocities perpetrated by US soldiers in the conflict by laying blame with the patriarchal institutions of government, state, and military who failed to give guidance and clear objectives to the soldier-sons.

The fall-out of America's costly campaign in Vietnam lingered during the late 1970s and 1980s until, in the aftermath of the First Gulf War in 1991, President George H.W. Bush proudly stated that America had "kicked the

Vietnam syndrome."[161] As the 1990s progressed and the country celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the 'Good War', the father figure returned to the Hollywood combat film and with it a restored sense of US morality in wartime. In *Saving Private Ryan*, for instance, concessions are made to the brutality the Vietnam War introduced to the combat film, and some American soldiers perform brutal and cruel acts such as shooting unarmed prisoners. However, the central squad are ultimately kept on a moral line by the patriarchal figure of Captain Miller. In one scene, discussed by McCrisken and Pepper, the soldiers consider shooting an unarmed German prisoner but Miller restores the 'natural order' and prevents them.[162] This is also evidenced in combat films set after WWII, in which American military action is predicated on humanitarian grounds and the US soldiers retain their morality thanks to the guidance of a paternal figure. Examples include *Black Hawk Down* (2001), in which Sam Shepherd's General Garrison oversees the US intervention in the Somalian genocide; *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) in which a US serviceman exposes a Bosnian genocide while Gene Hackman's Admiral Reigart fights to get him to safety; and *Tears of the Sun* (2003), in which Bruce Willis' Lt. Waters guides his men on a rescue mission in Nigeria. This configuration was even applied to *We Were Soldiers* (2002), a Vietnam War film in which Mel Gibson portrays Lt. Col. Hal Moore, who is both a father to his children as well as a metaphorical father to his soldiers (emphasised yet further by his contrast to the grandfatherly Sgt. Maj. Plumley). In depicting a battle at the beginning of Vietnam War, before America's reputation and morality was called into question, Moore's role as moral guide is enforced even if the spectre of Vietnam remains. Together, these films helped to restore the moral image of the American military. As Cynthia Weber summarises in relation to *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Black Hawk Down*, for example:

> In very different ways, each film reclaims the moral character of its aimless post-Vietnam era son/soldier by reclaiming the morality of his mission. Each film suggests that, in the 1990s as today, the most moral of missions is not to fight for God and for country; it is to fight for humanity, in whatever country, loyal to whichever God. Humanitarian interventions, then, are key to morally justified (or at least morally justifiable) interventions. As such, they are also the key to rescuing America from the moral morass that is its post-Vietnam legacy.[163]

McCrisken and Pepper have noted that in the wake of 9/11 films such as *Black Hawk Down*, portraying exemplary US servicemen fighting for moral causes, "tapped into a rich patriotic vein" among American audiences.[164]

Indeed, in his autobiography former Navy SEAL Chris Kyle – the subject of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014) – states that in order to get himself and his fellow recruits "psyched up" ready for the toughest week of basic training a triple bill of films was screened featuring *Braveheart*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *We Were Soldiers*.[165] In each film the heroes fight not for purely personal reasons but to help others, and in so doing display their martial skills. To quote Weber: "It should come as little surprise, then, that both the first two battles in the war on terror – in Afghanistan and in Iraq – were justified by the Bush administration in part on humanitarian grounds."[166] As mentioned above, Rumsfeld's comparisons between 9/11 and Afghanistan to Pearl Harbor and the Doolittle Raids attempted to equate the new conflict with the 'Good War', and in so doing justify the invasion as a retaliatory action rather than an unprovoked act of aggression.[167]

The US military and Bush administration appeared to be making efforts to avoid comparisons to Vietnam during the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Popular opinion favoured the Bush administration during the initial invasion of Iraq, and the mainstream US media was equally supportive of the campaign.[168] However, these media outlets relied upon the US military for access to materials such as CG graphics of weapons and strategies, high altitude imagery of aerial strikes, special appearances by retired generals offering (favourable) analysis of tactics, and the option of 'embedding' journalists with the forces.[169] The US military and government complied with many requests with the objective of maintaining domestic support for the invasion and avoiding a repeat of Vietnam's coverage.[170] However, critical perspectives on the war emerged through other outlets, including the internet and in documentaries such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004).[171] These were often illustrated by imagery shot by soldiers using digital cameras or mobile phones and uploaded onto blogs and YouTube, allowing viewers a different perspective on the war.[172] However, with the revelations of prisoner abuse at sites such as Abu Ghraib in 2003, the publication of images from the prison in spring 2004, and atrocities including the 2006 rape and murder of an Iraqi teenager at Mahmudiya by US soldiers, popular support for the wars diminished among large swathes of the US population. David Ryan has cited a series of Pew polls conducted in the US which revealed that 93 percent of

respondents supported US actions in Iraq in 2003, but by early 2005 this had shrunk to 54 percent.[173] Weber summarises that:

> When, in the spring of 2004, images of US soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners circulated in the global media, any credible claim the United States made to an enlightened, humanitarian *we* for its post-Vietnam era band of brothers (and, in this case, sisters) was lost.…As far as the wider world was concerned, the United States, which always claims the moral high ground, had exposed its "true" moral character to the world.[174]

Whether Afghanistan and/or Iraq have repeated the Vietnam War has been debated by various commentators in and out of the academic community. Of these, Marilyn Young has presented perhaps the best argument, in that while the conflicts are different in many ways, their thematic elements align. She writes:

> The history of Iraq, its demography, topography, resources, culture, and the nature of its resistance and insurgency are radically different from Vietnam. Vietnam haunts the war in Iraq in part because it has begun to smell like defeat but more significantly, I think, because the task the US has taken upon itself is similar: to bend a country about which it knows little, whose language and history are unknown to its soldiers, to its will.[175]

Young's suggestion that Vietnam "haunts" the war in Iraq (and, arguably, Afghanistan) is evident in how the combat film has evolved in recent years. Esther MacCallum-Stewart has incorrectly called 9/11 a "cut off point for the modern war film, after which historical events also intervened to change the ways that warfare is currently regarded."[176] The similarities between pre-9/11 combat films and those produced around 2003 or early 2004 are relatively consistent in their themes and tropes; including the presence of the father figure. However, following the revelations of prisoner abuse, rising casualty rates and no clear signs of victory or an exit strategy popular support for the war decreased. As such, 2003/4 and the Iraq War has had a far greater impact on the evolution of the combat film than 9/11. A new cycle of combat films emerged roughly between the years 2005-2008, and can be identified by its repetition of tropes synonymous with 1980s Vietnam War combat films. Works such as *Redacted*, *Battle for Haditha*, *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) are united by their depiction of a conflict without clear objectives or a moral cause for fighting, in a country with a hostile environment, an enemy indistinguishable from civilians, the use of booby-traps (namely Improvised Explosive Devices [IEDS]) and guerrilla warfare tactics, and the abandonment of US soldier-sons (and daughters) by the government and

military superiors. This is ultimately encapsulated by the disappearance of the father figure.

As with numerous Vietnam War films, many Iraq War films mix brief scenes of combat with extended narratives in which veterans and casualties return to America. Back home, they suffer from PTSD and revisit their wartime experiences through sequences designed to replicate footage of the actual war shot using helmet-mounted cameras, camcorders, or camera-phones. In some cases, the characters physically replay footage they have recorded on their cameras to envision the Iraq War experience. Garrett Stewart has termed this motif “flashback as digital playback”: in recording their experiences, the soldiers can remember and revisit history as they witnessed it.[177] In allowing this personalised perspective into the soldiers’ experiences of war, we see an alternate version of Iraq War history to that presented by the government, military, and mainstream media. Furthermore, Martin Barker believes the films suggest US servicemen and women are not inherently corrupt, but have been driven to commit acts including rape and murder by the conditions in Iraq and their desertion by their superiors/father-figures.[178] Essentially, the post-2003 combat film has reverted to the 1980s Vietnam War film model.

Similar motifs were extended to combat films and television series set prior to the twenty-first century. The HBO miniseries *The Pacific* (2010), for instance, is one of the bloodiest and most brutal portrayals of America’s war against Japan during WWII. Its predecessor, *Band of Brothers* (2001), reiterated the father figure tropes and morally respectable soldier-sons of combat films produced prior to the invasion of Iraq. By contrast, *The Pacific* depicts Japanese and American servicemen alike committing barbaric acts seen through the eyes of two US soldiers who would later memorialise their experiences in the memoirs upon which the series is based. Similarly, Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) depicts the context surrounding the iconic photograph of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima. It explores issues of propaganda, the recording of history, and the brutal reality of war compared to how events are enshrined. The principal protagonists all suffer from PTSD upon their return to America, and they experience repeated flashbacks to the battle. Unusually for a WWII film of recent years, there is also no strong

patriarchal figure present to protect or guide the soldiers. These points are also evidenced in Eastwood's companion piece, *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), and in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) – albeit a very different work.

Issues of torture and imprisonment, abandonment by father figures (and the institutions they represent), hostile environments, guerrilla warfare, invasion and occupation, memory and the recording of history are pronounced themes throughout the current cycle of ancient world epics. Over the following chapters I will identify the extent to which these features could derive from the ancient world epic genre itself, but in so doing I will also explore the ways in which the genre has merged with that of the combat film.

STRUCTURE As discussed, this thesis focuses on epics set in the ancient world, a genre that had largely been dormant from the 1960s until its revival with *Gladiator*. This thesis is one of the first major studies of meaning and interpretation in the current cycle of ancient world epics, focussing on the potential for allegory and analogy to be employed by these films to engage with events contemporaneous with their production. As this is primarily in relation to America's involvement in the Middle East, specifically 9/11, the War on Terror, and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, I theorised that films aimed at the US market are most likely to contain material open to those interpretations: in order for allegory or analogies to be recognised, the author requires an informed viewer to identify them. As with McCrisken and Pepper, I have not attempted to apply a strict approach as to which films qualify as 'Hollywood' or even 'American' films, as financing, production, and distribution are often multinational.[179] In selecting which films to explore, my criteria decreed that the films needed to be set in the ancient world and have been released theatrically in the US and UK after 9/11. The latter event was an obvious choice, as it has been a catalyst that has affected American cinema as well as foreign policy. However, selecting an end-point for my choice of films was not as evident; at least initially. Beginning this thesis in 2011, the epic cycle was ongoing – and indeed has continued to expand. However, following the release of *Wrath of the Titans* in 2012 there was a hiatus without further entries to the cycle until 2014. Including *Wrath of the Titans* in my

analysis made logical sense as its predecessor, *Clash of the Titans*, was already in the list of films I intended to investigate. On inspecting the 2014 releases, there was evidence that the films could be defined as a 'second wave' within the cycle. Of the films in question, *300: Rise of an Empire*, *Hercules*, and *The Legend of Hercules* were evidently derivative of *300* and its stylised aesthetic. The other two major releases that year, *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, were both Old Testament epics – the first of the current cycle. As such, extending my analysis to these films would have meant a new set of critical questions and contexts. Furthermore, the US led-invasion of Iraq is one of the principal events influencing this thesis, and officially the US withdrew from the country in 2011. While *Wrath of the Titans* would have been in production during this process and could conceivably have been influenced by the conflict, the 2014 releases were produced and released after the US withdrawal. I therefore concluded that 2012 and *Wrath of the Titans* marked the end of a 'first wave' of ancient world epics in the current cycle, especially from the perspective of my analysis.

The structure of this thesis is informed by my approach to genre: the four chapters are equally divided between the Greek and Roman epic, respectively. Chapter One involves two Greek epics, *Troy* and *Alexander*, which were among the first ancient world epics to follow the release of *Gladiator* and the events of 9/11, and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Each film depicts its historical narrative as a true event, while acknowledging that their subjects would become mythologised or romanticised thereafter. Neither depicts fantastical creatures, and each involves a Hellenic force invading a foreign – primarily Eastern – empire. Within this chapter, I focus on how these films depict conflict and warfare through their hybridisation of the ancient world epic with the combat film. In identifying this process, I also explore how their respective directors contribute to the creation of meaning through publicity and promotion, as well as through contextualising these films within their other work.

These features will similarly be discussed in relation to the films in Chapter Two. The primary focus of this chapter is *300*, an adaptation of a graphic novel about the Greek defence of Thermopylae from the invading Persian army. *300* was the next Greek epic to be released after *Troy* and *Alexander*,

and this chapter considers how the film built on those previous ancient world epics in terms of content, publicity, and its depiction of warfare. Furthermore, I discuss *300*'s genre hybridity through its amalgamation of the combat film and comic book movie to radically reimagine the ancient world epic's aesthetic style. In the concluding section of the chapter, I discuss the impact *300* has had on the current cycle, which is most directly evidenced by the return of the mythological epic in *Clash of the Titans*, *Wrath of the Titans*, and *Immortals* (2011).

In the second half of this thesis I move on to the Roman epics released in the wake of *Gladiator*. In Chapter Three, I focus on four films that depict the Roman occupation of Britain: *King Arthur* (2004), *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion*, and *The Eagle*. Again, I discuss the ways these films utilise the tropes of the combat film, but expand this area of discussion to explore the influence of the western. In particular, I analyse the similarities between how these films and the western genre depict the frontier mythology and the liminal space between 'civilisation' and 'wilderness'. In doing so, I apply these themes to the US-led occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and the recurrent theme – and criticism – of imperialism in the Roman-Britain epics.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I conclude this study with analysis of two Roman epics which foreground religion within their narratives: *The Passion of the Christ* and *Agora*. I explore the manner in which the aftermath of 9/11, including the War on Terror and subsequent conflicts, could be regarded as a 'Holy War' between Christians and Muslims. I examine these films, both of which depict religious tensions and ensuing violence in Roman-controlled provinces, and determine the extent to which they may be regarded as referencing contemporary events. In the case of *The Passion of the Christ*, I also extend my analysis to consider the film's depiction of torture and supernatural imagery in relation to the post-9/11 horror film.

I approached this study and the films therein without preconceived ideas as to whether the films and their content could (or should) be regarded as allegorical or analogous to contemporary events. As my research developed, particular themes and tropes began to emerge, and in such cases I would

revisit the other films to assess whether these features were indigenous to an individual film or occurred in others. In so doing, I examined each film as a single case study but was able to build up the connections between the films within each setting, within the cycle, and within the genre itself. Of the themes that emerged from my research, two particularly stood out: the unreliable narrator/recording of history and the father figure. These topics run throughout this thesis, drawing together a number of points as my analysis and conclusions progress from chapter to chapter. The father figure, as I have mentioned, is closely associated with the evolution of the combat film and was an early indicator that the ancient world epic had closer ties to the combat film than merely depicting scenes of warfare. Across each chapter I will discuss the role of fathers in these films and how their role can be interpreted.

As discussed at the beginning of this introduction, a central debate among scholars of history on film is whether historical films have value as works that engage with historical debates. While the chapters that follow are principally concerned with how this cycle of ancient world epics has engaged with the political and social climate in which they were produced, through analysing the motif of the unreliable narrator/recording of history I reveal how this cycle has also engaged with wider historical debates. Specifically, in encouraging viewers to question and challenge the veracity of the narratives being related to us and how the events are seemingly being recorded, these films draw attention to the very debate at which they are the centre: are historical films any different in their construction than written histories? This debate begins in Chapter One through the figures of Odysseus and Ptolemy, and how they record the wars which defined their lives.

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[167] Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*, 2nd. ed. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 669; Weber, *Imagining America at War*, 22, 26-29.
[168] John Keegan, *The Iraq War* (London: Hutchinson, 2004), 122; Patrick Cockburn, *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq*, 2nd. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 34.
[169] Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2009), 178-9, 204-5.
[170] Tony Williams, "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies," in *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Anderegg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 121; Weber, *Imagining America at War*, 156.
[171] Prince, *Firestorm*, 190.
[172] Martin Barker, *A 'Toxic Genre' – The Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 34.
[173] Ryan, "'Vietnam', Victory Culture and Iraq," 127.
[174] Weber, *Imagining America at War*, 89.
[175] Young, "The Vietnam Laugh Track," 39.
[176] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, "Battleground: Storming the Beaches – Recent Popular Culture and the Representation of Warfare," in *Under Fire: A Century of War Movies*, ed. Jay Slater (Hersham: Ian Allen Publishing, 2009), 275.
[177] Garrett Stewart, "Digital Fatigue: Imaging War in Recent American Film," *Film Quarterly* 62. 4 (Summer 2009): 51, accessed January 19, 2011, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40301356.
[178] Barker, *A 'Toxic Genre'*, 98-9.
[179] McCrisken and Pepper, *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film*, x-xi.

Chapter One – Tellers of Tales: War Stories in *Troy* (2004) and *Alexander* (2004).

> …no matter what the director's expressed intentions were, the contemporary backdrop will inevitably inform the experience of viewers.[1]

The above quote derives from an essay by Thomas Harrison on Oliver Stone's 2004 epic *Alexander*. The reception of Stone's film gives credence to Harrison's argument, as contemporary events ranging from a same-sex marriage vote in the US to American involvement in the Middle East influenced critical and audience reception. Stone himself contributes an essay in the same collection, in which he discusses how *Alexander* was received, his various edits of the film, and what his intentions were in making it. In the essay, Stone calls analogous and allegorical interpretations of the film relating to US involvement in the Middle East "facile", and denies that such interpretations were his intention.[2] The reception of *Troy* was similar to that of *Alexander*, in that some critics also interpreted the film as analogous to contemporary events while others regarded the film as vacuous spectacle. However, director Wolfgang Petersen took an antithetical approach to that of Stone in how he discussed the contemporary parallels to his film, stating:

> Of course, we didn't start saying: Let's make a movie about American politics . . . But while we were working on it we realized that the parallels to the things that were happening out there were obvious . . . this direct connection between Bush's power politics and that of Agamemnon in the *Iliad*, this desire to rule the world, to trample everything underfoot that gets in your way, that became evident only during filming. Only gradually did we realize how important Homer still is today.[3]

The dichotomies of interpretation evidenced by these filmmakers and their audience reveal rich ground for exploration. Obviously, attributing authorial status to a director such as Petersen or Stone can be a controversial act as filmmaking is conventionally seen as a collaborative process. Nevertheless, it is common to read features, reviews, and academic works that cite the director as shorthand for the guiding creative force in a film's production, therefore elevating their apparent influence in the creation of meaning. 'Auteur theory' rose to prominence during the 1950s and early 1960s, in which critics would view a film in the context of a filmmakers' larger body of work to discover, as David Bordwell explains, any "characteristic stylistic and dramatic patterns [that] reflect underlying themes".[4] One must nevertheless consider that a director's influence can vary depending on how actively involved they are at

different stages of production: Stone, for instance, researched, co-wrote, co-produced, directed, and then worked closely with the editors of *Alexander* (ultimately producing four different cuts of the film, to date). Petersen, comparatively, co-produced and directed *Troy* but the script is credited solely to David Benioff. When a script is already in place, David A. Gerstner has compared the director's role to being like that of a conductor or musician interpreting a piece of music.[5] André Bazin, on the other hand, suggests that meaning created through visuals is likely to be the work of the director regardless of what is in the script.[6] The range of influences in the "production experience" – to borrow Eldridge's phrase – leaves most commentators at a loss as to who to credit as the author of a specific element, but one could conclude, as V.F. Perkins does, that "the director's authority is a matter not of total creation but of sufficient control."[7]

More significantly, directors are often given a position of status within the marketing of a film. In his iconic essay, "What is an Author?", Foucault describes the commodification of the author within a capitalist system whereby their status as creator is used to promote their work.[8] For example, prior to *300* (2007), Zack Snyder's only feature film credit was his horror film remake *Dawn of the Dead* (2004). Posters for *300* described the film as 'From the Creator of *Sin City*' referring (if not by name) to Frank Miller, the author of the graphic novels upon which both films were based. In so doing, *300*'s debt to the comic book movie and to Miller was promoted over its status as a historical epic or the influence of its director. Snyder and cinematographer Larry Fong even supported this in publicity for the film, regularly citing Miller's influence as "the blue-print for the look of our film."[9] However, following *300*'s success Snyder's next project, *Watchmen* (2009), was advertised on posters and in trailers as 'From the visionary director of *300*'. In calling Snyder a 'visionary', the publicity for *Watchmen* retrospectively attributes authorship of *300* to him rather than Miller and gives Snyder status as both an artist and an author with which to sell *Watchmen* – another graphic novel adaptation – to prospective audiences. As such, marketing can promote a director as a prominent influence in the creation of a work and its meaning, which some filmmakers will utilise to espouse their own reading of a film. Nowhere is this more evident than in Cecil B. DeMille's aforementioned introduction to *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Eldridge cites this as an example of when a historical or mythical story could not construct a clear

analogy but instead utilises “related moments in time” to reflect on contemporary issues, and DeMille used his status as director/author to instruct audiences how to interpret the material.[10] Today, directors are offered even more opportunities to discuss the meaning of their work through various media platforms, including social media, interviews for online, television, and print outlets, and the plethora of special features that often accompany DVD and BluRay releases.

However, Ian Cameron suggests many interviews, features, and reviews are less concerned with promoting a director’s stated intentions with a film than assessing the extent to which their interpretation corroborates with that of the critic.[11] As Petersen and Stone discovered, stating a particular interpretation of their work in an interview does not always mean audiences will accept it, especially when the media outlet directs discussion onto other topics. For example, while promoting *Troy*, Petersen and members of the cast cited the parallels between the film’s narrative and America’s involvement in the Middle East.[12] Despite their suggestions of contemporary resonance, *Troy*’s deviations from Homer, its scale, battles, and the performance of Brad Pitt were far more common topics of discussion for critics.[13] Similarly, although Stone discussed Alexander’s attempt to unify East and West and his successes as a leader, the mainstream US and UK media frequently concentrated on *Alexander*’s use of accents, its length, and its treatment of the eponymous protagonist’s sexuality over his policies and achievements.[14] Indeed, the issue of Alexander’s sexuality garnered particular traction due to extensive US media coverage of eleven American states banning same-sex marriage (some by large margins) which occurred less than twenty-five days before the film’s US release, in what Jon Solomon describes as “a period of homophobic frenzy”.[15] While promoting the film in Britain in early 2005, Stone blamed its critical and commercial failure in the US on homophobia within the American electorate, concluding: “On *JFK* [1991] I gambled on the audience’s intelligence and won. Here, I lost.”[16]

Petersen and Stone ultimately had little impact in the direction US and UK media discussion took surrounding their respective films. This may be because *Troy* and *Alexander* were among the first epics to be released after *Gladiator*, and as such the ancient world epic was still a relative novelty on studio slates and cinema screens. Petersen and Stone also adopted the unusual route of following the successful and

quintessentially Roman epic *Gladiator* with Greek epics. As discussed in the Introduction, ancient Greece has conventionally had a problematic relationship with Hollywood and American cinema-going audiences, and these two films reiterated Nisbet's argument by underperforming in the domestic market compared to the Roman epic *The Passion of the Christ*, released that same year. More significant to this study, however, is the fact that *Troy* and *Alexander* were among the first ancient world epics to be produced after the events of 9/11 and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. While a range of interpretations were offered by critics, some among them attributed contemporary meaning to the films' depictions of conflict between East and West. This chapter takes each film as a separate case study, exploring allegorical and analogous interpretations to assess the available evidence and ascertain whether these interpretations should be given credence. Furthermore, I explore the films' relationship to the 1950s-60s cycle of epics, the influence of their respective directors, and their incorporation of the combat film into the semantic and syntactic components of the epic genre.

TROY *Troy* is a euhemeristic depiction of the iconic conflict in which an alliance of Greek kingdoms under the command of the Mycenaean king, Agamemnon, laid siege to the city of Troy. The catalyst for the conflict comes when Paris, a Trojan Prince, elopes with Helen, the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus. Agamemnon uses this event as a thinly veiled pretext for instigating a war against the Trojan king, Priam, and expanding his empire. Despite the efforts of Priam's eldest son, Hector, the Greeks successfully land at Troy due to the martial skill of the Greek warrior, Achilles. He takes Briseis, a Trojan priestess and cousin of Paris and Hector, as his prisoner; the two then fall in love. Agamemnon then claims Briseis as his spoil of war, causing Achilles to abandon the conflict in an act of defiance. However, when Hector accidentally kills Achilles' cousin, Patroclus, he returns to combat, kills Hector, and desecrates his corpse by dragging it behind his chariot. Achilles and Odysseus then infiltrate Troy hidden inside a large wooden horse offered as a sign of peace and surrender by the Greeks. Under cover of night they open the gates of Troy for the waiting Greek army and the city is razed to the ground. Amidst the destruction Achilles is shot and killed by Paris, who then escapes with Helen and

Briseis. Priam and Agamemnon are also killed, and the Trojans massacred. The film ends with Odysseus overseeing Achilles' funeral.

This narrative has been adapted for the screen before, including one major Hollywood release during the 1950s-60s cycle in the form of *Helen of Troy* (1956). The film, directed by Robert Wise, was often overlooked during the promotion and release of *Troy* despite the two sharing a number of similarities in their treatment of the ancient narrative. This omission may be because the makers of *Troy* desired their film to appear original and independent of its cinematic forebear, especially as associating the film with the lesser-known *Helen of Troy* may not have encouraged contemporary audience interest. Nevertheless, the two films both present a euhemeristic take on the Trojan War, jettisoning the gods and rationalising some of the more fantastical elements of the myth such as Achilles' heel. The opening act of *Helen of Troy* dwells longer in Greece and lends greater narrative and dramatic weight to Helen and Paris' love story than *Troy*, but ultimately their relationship also amounts to little more than a catalyst for Menelaus' (rather than Agamemnon's) imperial ambitions. However, in this version Agamemnon and Menelaus survive, Paris is killed, and Helen is returned to her husband.

Despite its Greek setting and similarities to *Helen of Troy*, *Troy* also exhibits the influence of *Gladiator* on the genre. Nowhere is this more evident than in the similarities between Maximus and Hector. Both films continue what Arthur Pomeroy has identified as the ancient world epic's propensity to utilise historical settings to depict a traditional form of masculinity synonymous with violence, rural life, and/or manual labour.[17] As Cyrino has argued, *Gladiator* revived this for contemporary audiences, as "Maximus reaches back to an idea of masculine bravery and goodness defined as more old-fashioned, by both modern American and ancient Roman standards."[18] However, Maximus subtly subverts a trope of the Roman epic in which the soldier returns from war to find a wife, start a family, and settle into peacetime: in *Gladiator*, Maximus already has these things and longs to return to them. In *Troy*'s first act, Hector returns from peace talks with Sparta to his wife and son and, like Maximus, is reluctantly thrust into violence. Both characters are intelligent military commanders and efficient killers, and both will ultimately die in a duel with their adversary while protecting those they love. Maximus and Hector,

unlike Achilles, also operate under father figures for much of their respective narratives; Marcus Aurelius and Proximo become paternal figures for Maximus, while Hector follows the commands of his father, Priam, even when he questions his wisdom. Even the casting of Hector mirrors *Gladiator*, with the bearded, dark-haired Australian actor Eric Bana evoking Russell Crowe's Maximus. Similarly, the bearded, white-haired Priam portrayed by former hell-raiser Peter O'Toole follows in the footsteps of Richard Harris' appearance in *Gladiator*. Lines of *Gladiator*'s dialogue appear to have been appropriated by Benioff's script: Maximus' "What we do in life echoes in eternity" becomes Achilles' "Immortality; take it – it's yours!", while Maximus' threat to Commodus that "I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next", becomes Paris' declaration to Helen that "We will be together, in this world or the next." *Troy* is not alone in such borrowings from *Gladiator*, as we shall see.

Fig.1.1: Hector in *Troy*

Given the success of *Gladiator*, the choice to then adapt the Trojan War at first seems peculiar considering the aforementioned issues ancient Greece connotes for Hollywood. However, the Trojan War is one of the most iconic stories in Western literature and, as with the ancient world epics of the early 1900s, utilising a narrative known to most audiences would aid in publicity and audience comprehension. *Troy* also exhibits a series of subtle choices in its construction that tackle those areas

which have conventionally been problematic for Greek epics. For instance, while *Troy* references various Greek kingdoms, its narrative does not require knowledge of their geography or socio-political connections to understand the action; especially as the central conflict is essentially delineated between Greeks and Trojans. Within this (somewhat anachronistic) depiction of a unified Greece under the central command of Agamemnon, the key political relationships between kingdoms are further explained through personal relationships: Paris (Troy) insults Menelaus (Sparta) by taking Helen, so Menelaus asks his brother Agamemnon (Mycenae) for help; Odysseus (Ithaca), Ajax (Salamis) and Triopas (Thessaly) go to war as they are duty bound as subservient kingdoms, while Achilles joins to achieve fame. Unlike Roman epics, Greek epics rarely use the 'linguistic paradigm' and therefore *Troy* is free to represent the various regions of Greece through a multitude of dialects. In so doing, the use of accents allude to the scattered geography of the Greek city states (*poleis*) without requiring extensive exposition: Agamemnon is Scottish, Menelaus is Irish, Odysseus is a Yorkshireman, Achilles is American, and the Trojans speak in theatre's Received Pronunciation.

Similarly, while we see brief scenes set in Greek locations such as Sparta (anachronistically on the coast), the *mise-en-scene* is relatively basic with the film's visual focus belonging to the characters and Troy itself. The city's sprawling urban landscape as it appears in the film contains material from various ancient cultures and dwarfs the archaeological evidence for the real Troy, but it nevertheless provides the urban spectacle one often associates with Rome and confines much of the action on a single landscape. As we will see in relation to *Alexander* and *300*, *Troy* also combats Greece's reputation for being 'intellectual' by focusing entirely on a war between nations with ample bloody battles. Likewise, in portraying one of the most famous heterosexual love affairs in literary history *Troy* attempts to bypass associations between the setting and 'Greek love'. However, some critics attacked the film for portraying Achilles and Patroclus as cousins rather than lovers: Emmanuel Levy complained the filmmakers were "playing it safe" so as not to "offend any segment of the potential public", while *The Guardian*'s Alex von Tunzelmann described the approach as a "radical straightening process."[19] Levy, von Tunzelmann, and others were apparently unaware of the fact that Homer actually refers to the two characters as cousins, and there is still debate among

historians as to whether they were lovers or simply ‘brothers in arms’ through shared experience of warfare, as is a common relationship between men in combat films.

Critics were also quick to judge the film with regards to its comparisons to Homer. Writer David Benioff has stated that his script “ransacks” a wide range of sources, and the film should not be regarded solely as an adaptation of the *Iliad*.[20] Indeed, the film’s credits state that it is ‘Inspired By’ rather than ‘Based On’ the 8th Century BC epic.[21] Nevertheless, critics – including von Tunzelmann – mocked the film for its deviations from Homer as if they were made through ignorance rather than active choice.[22] These changes include condensing the Trojan War’s ten year chronology down to approximately three or four weeks – although the *Iliad* itself only takes place over a two week period within the larger ten year chronology of the war. The film presents a clear chronological narrative motivated by cause and effect rather than a specific moment in a larger narrative which would require extensive flashbacks or narration to contextualise. Furthermore, in Homer’s account of the Trojan War the character given the greatest significance among the ensemble, Achilles, spends the majority of the work sulking in his tent before we see him in action. Condensing the time period covered by the narrative and expanding its range of events was therefore a logical choice to allow *Troy* to appeal to a wider audience unfamiliar with Homer’s text. It also enabled the film to include the iconic ‘Trojan Horse’ (built by the Greeks), which does not appear in the *Iliad*. Perhaps the greatest difference between *Troy* and the *Iliad* (or the literary tradition in general) is ultimately in the film’s killing of a number of characters who survived in most ancient versions of the Trojan War. While this could be interpreted as a concession to mainstream cinemagoers who desire closure, redemption, or catharsis from their films, I argue below that the changes have a greater symbolic significance.

Troy also reiterates the argument made by James Russell, cited in the Introduction, that the revival of the epic cycle in the 1990s was driven by filmmakers revisiting the films of their own childhoods which, in many cases, included the 1950s-60s cycle. In certain cases, the filmmaker would also have a personal connection to their work which the film’s marketing would emphasise. This was the case for Petersen, born in 1941 in Germany, whose schooling included reading the *Iliad* in ancient Greek.[23] Conversely, it may have been this much-repeated connection between Petersen and

Homer's text that led critics to mistakenly assume *Troy* was an adaptation of the *Iliad* rather than a free retelling inspired by various sources. These included archaeological evidence on the historical site of Troy, promoted by an online production diary which was set up during filming and included information on the various excavations and cited archaeologist J. Lesley Fitton as historical advisor to the film.[24] This was seemingly devised to support the euhemeristic approach taken by Petersen and Benioff, although they do not go so far as to bill the film as being 'based on a true story'.

Troy was released worldwide in May 2004. Reviews were average, with recurrent topics of both compliment and complaint being the look and performance of Brad Pitt, the use of CGI, the cast, deviations from Homer, and how the film lacked the characterisation and depth of previous epics; most notably *Gladiator*. *Empire*'s Will Lawrence and *The Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw, for instance, compared *Troy* to its infamous wooden horse, concluding both are "hollow".[25] Despite the steps *Troy* appeared to have taken to avoid the pitfalls of the Greek epic, its US box office takings failed to reflect the promise the cast, spectacle, and budget of the film promised. Indeed, despite a reported budget of $175 million - $72 million more than *Gladiator* – the film took less at the US box office than Scott's Roman epic, although it fared better at the foreign box office.

Within this slightly muted response, some critics regarded *Troy* as containing material analogous to contemporary events. Monica Cyrino interprets Agamemnon's use of Helen's abduction to conceal his motives for war as paralleling the threat of WMD and connections to 9/11 that served as the pretext for the invasion of Iraq.[26] She was not alone in this regard, with Maryann Johanson adding that Agamemnon "is basically the Dubya of his day, Helen his WMDs (though of course she does actually exist), and Achilles … his Haliburton contractor."[27] David Edelstein likewise parallels the politics of Bush and Agamemnon, arguing that both send men into combat "to serve a grotesquely private, power-mad agenda – something to do with making a show of his might to scare the whole world into submission."[28] This interpretation essentially compares Agamemnon's pursuit of an imperialist agenda to the aims of PNAC in which he, like Armstrong's America, "calls for dominion over friends and enemies alike."[29] However, interpretations such as these varied from

critic to critic, with Will Lawrence arguing that: “the repeated affirmation of Paris and Helen’s love igniting the campaign dilutes this war-mongering subtext.”[30]

Others alluded to events in Iraq when describing *Troy*’s depiction of ancient warfare. Edward Rothstein, for instance, saw Achilles’ maltreatment of Hector’s corpse as evocative of the Iraqi abuse of four Blackwater employees in March 2004, where their badly burned corpses were dragged through the streets of Fallujah and hung from a bridge.[31] However, while this allusion serves to suggest a comparable act of unnecessary wartime brutality, it does little to suggest that *Troy* should be read as an analogy for the conflict. The film’s production schedule negates this event’s inclusion as an allusion to Fallujah, and the scene is a central moment in Homer’s text which reveals the pinnacle of Achilles’ wrath and instigating the meeting between him and Priam.[32] Achilles desecration of Hector’s body even reappears later in 2004, as a mural in Olympias’ bedroom in Stone’s *Alexander*.

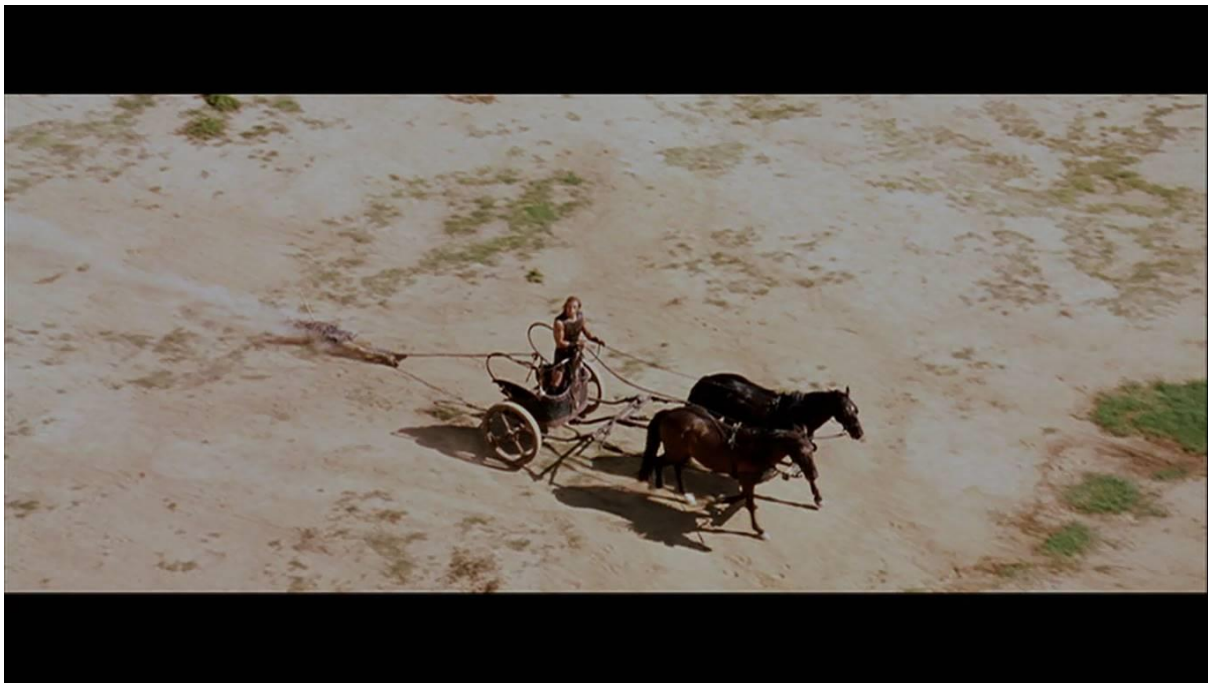

Fig.1.2: Achilles drags Hector’s body in *Troy*

Similarly, the argument that Helen’s abduction was a pretext for expansionist politics is not indigenous to either *Troy* or *Helen of Troy*, as the ancient Greek historian Thucydides similarly suggested that Agamemnon’s empire-building instigated the war.[33] However, contemporary critics can be forgiven for approaching *Troy* with the expectation that it would carry contemporary relevance. Joanna Paul has described

it as the “archetypal conflict between East and West” making it a distinctly ‘usable past’.[34] Frederick Ahl similarly notes that it has been continuously adapted and altered to suit a given storyteller’s needs over the centuries, with Winkler specifying how American authors have over time used it as an analogue for US involvement in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam.[35] Perhaps because of the narrative’s history of application to America’s wars, critics who discussed *Troy*’s retelling of the Trojan War may have been primed to read analogous or allegorical material into the film regardless of the filmmakers’ intentions.

As in the aforementioned quote from Petersen, *Troy* apparently did not begin production with the intention that it would reflect contemporary socio-political events. However, Petersen, Pitt, and other cast members referenced such parallels in interviews promoting the film at the 2004 Cannes film festival.[36] Petersen even drew an analogy similar to those above in an interview with a German news outlet, stating: “Just as King Agamemnon waged what was essentially a war of conquest on the ruse of trying to rescue the beautiful Helen from the hands of the Trojans, President George W. Bush concealed his true motives for the invasion of Iraq.”[37] Petersen’s reasoning for discussing contemporary relevance to *Troy* is less clear than the analogy he draws. One could hypothesise that because the film was being marketed as an epic story of love and war with big-budget spectacle during the blockbuster season it was somehow “hollow”, as Bradshaw and Lawrence suggested. In drawing attention to contemporary politics, Petersen and his cast may have been attempting to attract a market that would otherwise be uninterested in the film, or to create headlines (such as BBC News online’s “Pitt Compares *Troy* with Iraq War”) that would further publicise the film. However, while the pitfalls of the ancient Greek epic may have contributed to the film’s lacklustre box office performance and middling reviews, one could potentially cite Petersen’s and the cast’s promotion of Iraq War messages as similarly deterring audiences. This is understandably difficult to prove, but the film was released during a period of rising violence in Iraq and shortly after the publication of images from Abu Ghraib. Support for the conflict among Americans was decreasing, but some remained loyal to the Bush administration’s actions and/or to the soldiers on active duty. Petersen’s comments directly equated the antagonists in the film with the US government and its actions in Iraq, which may have antagonised some American audiences. *Troy*’s depiction of an ancient war arrived

during the closing phase of a cycle of combat films which developed during the 1990s in which America was associated with moral interventionism. *Troy* was at odds with these depictions of war, but in so doing it pre-empted the Iraq War cycle of combat films in which America becomes a violent aggressor and occupying power.

As *Troy* is evidently a film about war, it therefore begs the question as to whether the film should be regarded as an ancient world epic or a combat film. The close relationship between these two genres is facilitated through the omission of the Greek gods; their removal from the Trojan War narrative enable *Troy*'s characters to be in charge of their own fates and not at the mercy of interfering deities.[38] *Troy* therefore becomes an ensemble piece in which characters on both sides of a conflict endure a brutal and bloody war. This is in keeping with Petersen's previous work, which regularly depicts groups of characters – sometimes from opposing sides or different backgrounds – facing shared hardships, as in *Enemy Mine* (1985) and *The Perfect Storm* (2000). Nowhere is this more relevant than in Petersen's 1981 film *Das Boot*, based on the novel by Lothar-Günther Buchheim, about a German U-boat crew in WWII (which *Troy*'s trailer seems to allude to when Petersen's name appears over an overhead shot of a dark-blue sea). In focusing on characters that are conventionally regarded as 'the enemy' in US and UK productions, Petersen brings a new perspective to the conflict by depicting the German sailors as relatable characters. While they encounter characters who are staunch supporters of the Nazi ideology, others are highly critical of it and its ideologues. The German U-boat crew are evocative of how American and British servicemen and women are commonly portrayed in Hollywood and British combat films: they operate primarily to survive, to protect the men alongside them, and perform their duties as best they can. *Das Boot*'s enervating depiction of submarine warfare culminates in a despairing finale whereby the sailors survive a horrific ordeal at sea only to be killed or wounded by an air attack once they reach port. With Petersen acting as both co-writer and director, his film makes a simple yet effective case for the senselessness of war.

Petersen returns to these themes with *Troy*, where his ensemble cast embody a range of recognisable characteristics and reasons for going to war: Achilles seeks fame and glory; Agamemnon, power and land; Menelaus, revenge; Hector defends his country and family; Paris fights for love; and Odysseus because he is ordered to.

Each then suffers a moral – even ironic – fate: Menelaus meets a quick demise for his pursuit of vengeance; Agamemnon is killed by a woman he regarded as a spoil of war; Achilles is killed in an inglorious fashion by a man exposed as a coward; and Hector's sense of morality leads to his death and the desecration of his body. Priam romanticises war in telling Paris that fighting for love makes "more sense" than any other reason, but Paris then survives and must live with the inevitable guilt of having caused the destruction of his city, the death of his family, and the genocide of his countrymen. This bleak and downbeat ending is not uncommon for Hollywood's Greek epics; *Alexander the Great* and *The 300 Spartans* end with their eponymous character's deaths, while *Helen of Troy* climaxes with Paris' death as the city is sacked. This could therefore be added to Nisbet's list of reasons why audiences have conventionally favoured Roman epics over their Greek counterparts: audiences presuppose the ending and are deterred, or else they are surprised by the downbeat conclusions to these narratives. Most protagonists who die in ancient world epics do so for a justifiable cause, but in *Troy* the reasons are less clear. The Trojans, as with the Spartans in *300*, are resisting invasion. Hector defiantly tells Agamemnon: "No son of Troy will ever submit to a foreign ruler", but unlike other epics such as *Braveheart* (1995), *King Arthur* (2004), and *300*, the term 'freedom' is rarely employed. Hector's death comes when he steps outside Troy's walls to face Achilles alone out of a sense of moral accountability for killing Patroclus, despite the death being accidental (as Patroclus was disguised in Achilles' armour at the time). This act symbolises the repetitious violence which is caused by retaliatory attacks; something that is mirrored in Achilles' inglorious death at the hands of Paris, avenging the death of his brother. Achilles is killed moments after he saves Briseis and appears to have developed a sense of moral direction which has been lacking throughout the narrative. The bitter irony in the dual deaths of Hector and Achilles reiterates *Troy*'s anti-war message. Indeed, the film's closing act echoes the end of *Das Boot*, as the Trojans believe they have survived the war when the Greeks seemingly offer up the wooden horse as acknowledgement that they have been defeated. However, at their point of elation in surviving the war a surprise attack spells their destruction.

This critique of warfare is compounded by the film's casting. In *300* and *Alexander* there is a clear dichotomy in how Eastern and Western forces are depicted, whereas

in *Troy* the conflict resembles a civil war through use of Caucasian stars from Europe, America and Australasia. The Greeks and Trojans worship the same gods and, as Priam confirms when reclaiming Hector's body from Achilles, they have the same funeral customs. This evokes an element of the WWII combat film identified in Jeanine Basinger's investigation into the genre: she argues that combat films set in the European theatre of war portray the German military as similar to the Allies due to their Caucasian physicality, whereas combat films set in the Pacific depict the Japanese as Oriental or 'Other'.[39] McCrisken and Pepper similarly note that in Pacific war combat films: "racism determined the way the Japanese were both depicted and treated."[40] This also applies to depictions of the Vietnamese in Vietnam War films, as well as to Iraqis and Afghans in contemporary war films. However, *Troy*'s depiction of nations at war mirrors that of *Das Boot* in emphasising racial and cultural similarities rather than differences between the Greeks and Trojans. In so doing, Petersen further emphasises his message of war's futility and senselessness.

While Paris' affair with Helen is the catalyst for war, both sides are under no illusion that the conflict is predicated on Agamemnon's policy of imperial expansion. By contrast, the Trojans are reluctantly thrown into war, with Hector acting as the moral exemplar of the Trojan people: he is a father, a son, a brother, a husband, and fights to defend those he loves. He respects the rules of war, expresses regret at the death of Patroclus, and is at first the antithesis of Achilles until the latter learns and develops over the course of the narrative. Although the film directs audience sympathy and identification towards the Trojans, the Greek army also contains sympathetic characters such as Odysseus and, eventually, Achilles. Odysseus, like the U-boat commander in *Das Boot*, does not support Agamemnon's plans for conquest but performs his duty and generally respects codes of honour in war. He and Achilles are soldiers serving in a conflict beyond their control. Ahl believes Petersen is particularly attuned to this theme due to his German nationality, as he is able to understand war from the perspective of a defeated nation which, unlike the American experience in Vietnam, has in living memory experienced its cities and countryside becoming battlegrounds.[41]

Indeed, one could easily associate the sequence in which Troy is burned to the ground as an allusion to the firebombing of Dresden in 1945. Although I have found

no statements from the filmmakers to suggest this was their intention, given Petersen's sympathetic portrayal of the harsh realities of war for the German people in *Das Boot* it is possible that he drew upon similar inspiration in depicting the destruction of Troy. The sequence sees the Greeks set fire to the city, complete with repeated shots of buildings and wooden structures ablaze. The camera is often positioned at street level to observe much of the destruction from the perspective of the civilians fleeing for their lives, and the images of burning buildings and collapsing structures are intercut with images of Trojans being stabbed or clubbed to death by the Greek soldiers. The sequence crescendos with sight of Agamemnon stood in the city's main square below the burning 'Trojan' horse shouting to the Greek army: "Let it burn! Let Troy burn!" The Director's Cut of this sequence includes sight of babies being hurled into burning buildings, men being hung from upper windows and rooftops, and women being raped. While the latter edit is more graphic and conveys the barbarity in greater detail, both versions emphasise the civilian trauma of the burning of Troy. Dialogue, shot composition and *mise-en-scène* throughout the sequence emphasise the significance of fire, burning, and the slaughter of innocent people. While much of *Troy* is principally concerned with the effects of war on its combatants, the climax details its impact on civilians. If one were to read this as an allusion to the fire-bombing of Dresden, it would be in keeping with Ahl's interpretation of Petersen's qualification to depict warfare.

Fig.1.3: Achilles looks out over the Greek fleet arriving on the Trojan beach in *Troy*

Ahl also argues that *Troy* is indebted to the WWII combat film in its depiction of warfare; a proposal I suggest is evidence of hybridisation between the ancient world epic and the combat film. In the Greek ships hitting the Trojan beaches, Ahl identifies a series of allusions to the Normandy D-Day landings as depicted in *The Longest Day* (1962) and the opening scenes of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).[42] The latter received criticism for only showing the American experience of the Normandy landings, and Ahl suggests that *Troy* echoes this combat film cliché of US martial dominance when the American-accented Achilles and his Myrmidons take the Trojan beach almost single-handed before the rest of the Greek army arrives.[43] Achilles' storming of the beach even includes an assault on the temple of Apollo; a large stone structure which towers over the beach like a German bunker. The sequence in which Achilles takes the beach – from leaving the boat under fire, passing through the beach defences and taking the temple – mirrors the course of Captain Miller's experience on the Normandy beaches in *Saving Private Ryan*. Ahl concludes that in the case of *Troy*: "The same script, updated, could work for a film set in Europe between June 1944 and May 1945."[44]

WWII is not the sole influence on *Troy*'s depiction of warfare. Achilles' infamous hubris and quest for glory is tempered by a contemporary awareness of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder when he confesses to Patroclus that he is haunted by the ghosts of the men he has killed. This could be an allusion to Jonathan Shay's book, *Achilles in Vietnam*, in which he argues that Homer's portrait of Achilles corresponds to the common traits of PTSD found in Vietnam veterans.[45] Furthermore, in *Troy*'s Achilles we also see a similar employment of the 'absent father figure' motif familiar from Vietnam combat films and the work of Lynda Boose and Pat Aufderheide. In a brief scene before the campaign begins Achilles asks his mother for advice, but his father is never seen. Agamemnon is in a position to become a surrogate father figure to the young warrior, but instead he uses and betrays Achilles, and is in turn rejected by him. Furthermore, although Achilles leads his men in the beach landing he is no father figure himself; instead he evokes the counter-culture youth rebelling against the authorities in his display of selfish arrogance. When he does fight, he epitomises the morally lost soldier-son who commits atrocious acts including the desecration of Apollo's statue, allowing his men to murder Trojan priests, and mutilating Hector's

corpse. While some of these actions originate in Homer's *Iliad*, their inclusion in *Troy*'s war story narrative could conceivably be read as allusions to the behaviour of US soldiers in Vietnam. As with the 1990s cycle of combat films, however, Achilles eventually gains (albeit briefly) some form of moral code after his encounter with Priam; a father figure he can respect.

Compared to Achilles, *Troy*'s Hector is the traditional combat film father figure which resurfaced during the 1990s; he acts according to a moral code, he is protective of his men, and fights out of a sense of duty to his father and country and to protect his son. *Troy* arrived during the transitional period between the 1990s/early 2000s combat film and the cycle which resurrected the tropes of the 1980s Vietnam War film in reaction to events in the Iraq War. Petersen's film arrived too late to be clearly influenced by the Iraq War in this respect, as the director has acknowledged, but instead incorporates the archetypal abandoned soldier-son from the 1980s Vietnam cycle in Achilles alongside the 1990s/early 2000s moral exemplar in Hector. Incorporating both tropes into a narrative which emphasises the futility of war, alludes to prior conflicts, and is made by a director famed for an anti-war film, *Troy* applies the syntactic elements of the combat film to the semantic features of the Greek epic.

However, *Troy*'s employment of archetypal characters and tropes from two distinct cycles of the combat film allow the film's anti-war message to be applied across different conflicts. Emanuel Levy correctly concludes that: "For purposes of compression, Benioff has changed some elements in the story, reducing the complex poetic saga into a morally conventional war movie, one that has clear motivations and universal anti-war messages."[46] Jeremy Purves similarly argues: "If the film *Troy* could possibly be properly compared to the Iraq War that began at the time of its filming, it could be applied properly only in the sense that the themes of the *Iliad* can be universally applied to every war."[47] *Troy*'s pre-production would have pre-dated the invasion of Iraq as sets were already being built in early 2003, and there is little information with which to contest Petersen's claims that the film was not intended as an analogy for contemporary events despite the parallels one can draw. Nevertheless, through removing the gods and providing rational explanation for mythic events, the film gives agency to its characters and utilises an ensemble cast

to reflect a multitude of wartime experiences and motivations. Coupled to Petersen's reputation as the creator of an iconic anti-war film in *Das Boot*, this leads to the conclusion that *Troy*, too, is a film about war with a clear anti-war message that is applicable to various conflicts throughout history.

THE STORYTELLER There is, though, one final element of *Troy* which is of significance to the current cycle of ancient world epics and will become a recurrent point of interest in this thesis: the narrator. Most ancient world epics of the 1950s-60s cycle begin with a spoken prologue, usually by a male narrator, informing the audience of the period and location of the action, and highlighting the key themes of the narrative. Elena Theodorakopoulos states that: "The prologue is almost always characterised by its authority and by a certain finality in its outlook – it makes it clear to the viewer that there can only be one way of interpreting history."[48] She cites the prologue to *Quo Vadis* (1951) as a prime example:

> Imperial Rome is the centre of the Empire and undisputed master of the world. But with this power inevitably comes corruption. … On a Roman cross in Judaea 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 top the victorious Roman standards. This is the story of that immortal conflict.

Troy and other epics in this current cycle convey similar contextual material in their prologues, sometimes through a spoken narration and in others through text on screen: a practice employed by *Gladiator* seemingly to distance itself from the verbal convention of the previous cycle. However, the present cycle employs spoken narration in alternative and interesting ways that contribute to our understanding of the films to a greater extent than their generic predecessors. This derives from the speaker being a character within the film rather than the disembodied voice of 'history' or that of a historian. Even in cases where the narration was performed by a cast member – such as Richard Burton in *The Robe* – the information is still delivered in the same tone as that of *Quo Vadis* above and does not lend additional meaning to how we interpret the film or the character. In this current cycle, however, the narrator adopts a tone not of certainty or finality, but more often speaks from the perspective of the character's present and ruminates on the future and how their story will be remembered. In the case of *Troy*, after the text prologue appears over a

map of ancient Greece, we move to a wide shot of a Thessalian landscape accompanied by Odysseus' narration:

> Men are haunted by the vastness of eternity. And so we ask ourselves: will our actions echo across the centuries? Will strangers hear our names long after we are gone, and wonder who we were, how bravely we fought, how fiercely we loved?

Again, Maximus' "What we do in life echoes in eternity" speech hangs over *Troy*'s dialogue. There is also a melancholy aspect to Odysseus' narration: a fear of being forgotten and that one's actions will not matter. This theme relates most clearly to Achilles and his quest for glory. Soon after Odysseus' opening narration, we are introduced to Achilles as he is called upon to fight the Thessalian champion, Boagrius. A boy comments that he would be too afraid to fight him, leading Achilles to respond with a bored, arrogant: "And that's why no-one will remember your name". He is the ancient Greek equivalent of a modern celebrity – such as Brad Pitt. Odysseus, in his closing narration, comes to measure his own life against the achievements of Achilles he has witnessed. Indeed, he has been a witness to the Trojan War, and his personal connection to the events is evident in his closing narration, where the repetitious use of 'I' replaces the generalised 'we' of his introduction:

> If they ever tell my story let them say that I walked with giants. Men rise and fall like the winter wheat, but these names will never die. Let them say: I lived in the time of Hector, tamer of horses. Let them say: I lived in the time of Achilles.

Acknowledging *Troy*'s hybridisation of the ancient world epic with the combat film allows us to understand that Odysseus' narration is not simply that of a witness; it is also that of a soldier. We see him fight in the war and, in keeping with Homer's account, survive to become a veteran. Combat films regularly enshrine those who died in the conflicts being depicted, such as including a list of the deceased prior to the end credits. *Troy*'s configuration of this device mirrors the opening and closing scenes of *Saving Private Ryan*. In the opening scene of Spielberg's film we see an elderly man with his family walking through a vast war cemetery. As with Odysseus' narration, the imagery conjures up concepts of identity, memory, eternity, and death as the group pass rows and rows of graves. However, when we return to this scene at the film's conclusion we, like Odysseus, have now moved from the general to the specific as we learn the elderly man is in fact Private Ryan, and he is kneeling before the grave of Captain Miller. He asks his family if he has lived a good life, and earned

the sacrifice Miller made to save him. Here, the survivor honours the dead, remembers their name, and acknowledges the passage of time, as Odysseus does. Odysseus' narration could similarly be construed as an allusion to US soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan recording their experiences of war and relating them to others through websites and social media. However, there are no details in his two short speeches to suggest any specific relevance to the current conflicts above the general themes they relate about memorialising those who have died in war.

Fig.1.4: Odysseus contemplates the wooden horse in *Troy*

One could question whether these two short speeches are sufficient evidence to suggest that we are seeing the narrative from the perspective of Odysseus, or whether his speeches are simply a poetic bookend to the narrative. If one favours the former, as I do, it opens a new avenue for interpreting *Troy*'s narrative by bringing in awareness of Odysseus' historical reputation. In Homer's *Odyssey*, he is characterised as a cunning trickster (as is shown in *Troy*, in which he devises the wooden horse) and a storyteller, leading Hanna Roisman to suggest that his tales of fantastical creatures and witches may be pure invention designed to entertain his diegetic (and non-diegetic) audience.[49] With this in mind, a viewer aware of Odysseus' ability to invent could therefore question the 'facts' of the Trojan War given to us in *Troy*. Was Boagrius as large as he appears on screen? Could Achilles

really have despatched him so quickly and gracefully? How does Odysseus know of these events if he wasn't there? While *Troy* presents its narrative as if it is historical fact, over the course of the film we see the foundations of the Trojan War myth, such as Achilles' heel, being laid – possibly by Odysseus himself. It is therefore possible that his narration is a symbolic representation of the oral storytelling tradition through which the Trojan War narrative spread and eventually took form in the *Iliad*. If this is so, Odysseus is placed in a position as storyteller and, potentially, as an unreliable narrator. Considering Petersen's involvement with the anti-war film *Das Boot*, we can conclude that *Troy* is essentially a war story being conveyed to us by a veteran who, having witnessed the devastation of war, is similarly presenting an anti-war argument while acknowledging the need to memorialise the dead.

ALEXANDER Oliver Stone's *Alexander* was an ambitious attempt at depicting the eventful life of the eponymous conqueror within the confines of single narrative film. Before I explore Stone's film, I will establish some brief historical context to Alexander's life. In the fourth century BC Alexander's father, Philip II, united the various tribes of Macedon and created a disciplined army. While Alexander was in his teens Philip defeated an alliance of the Greek city states, thereafter uniting Greece and Macedon with the intention of invading Persia, liberating the Greek cities of Asia Minor, and exacting revenge for the destruction of Athens.[50] However, before the campaign began, Philip was murdered by a member of his bodyguard resulting in Alexander becoming king at the age of nineteen. He then led a Pan-Hellenic army into Persia and beyond, creating an empire that would encompass modern Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikstan, Libya and, at its furthest Eastern point, Pakistan.[51] However, it was in Pakistan (or India, as it was), that Alexander was forced to turn back due to illness, injury, and the threat of mutiny. Returning to Babylon, he died of either sickness or poisoning aged 32.

Alexander remains a controversial figure: sometimes characterised as a genocidal conqueror that destroyed cultural landmarks, killed thousands, forced Hellenic culture onto the East, and advocated mass rape through cross-cultural marriages.[52] Others regard him as an idealist who, in Stone's words: "furthered multiculturalism

and globalism to a degree never seen before in the history of the world."[53] To his supporters, Alexander liberated Persian-controlled Greek cities in Asia Minor, restored Persian and Greek temples, allowed Persians to join his army, increased literacy and Greek education, built cities, and supported cross-cultural marriages in an attempt to protect Persian women from abandonment when the Greco-Macedonian soldiers returned home.[54] Alexander was also an impressive military strategist who supposedly never lost a battle and fought alongside his soldiers as he expanded his empire by force. While some would regard this as imperialism, Stone reasons that: "I would call him not an imperialist, as present fashion would have it, but rather a 'proto-man', an enlightened monarch naturally in search of one land, one world – the unity, so to speak, of the womb."[55]

Fig.1.5: Alexander observes the terrain of Gaugamela with Ptolemy and Hephaestion in *Alexander*

In taking Persia, Alexander supplanted an Eastern ruler who was eventually put to death by his former subjects and became entangled in a prolonged guerrilla war in the mountains of Afghanistan. The contemporary parallels to US involvement in the Middle East are evident, and the film was fated to be read as an analogy regardless of whether Stone intended it. Some critics, such as *The New Yorker*'s Anthony Lane, compared Alexander's actions to those of the Bush administration and stated that *Alexander* is: "a strident argument in favour of unilateral aggression against foreign

powers, on the grounds that – guess what – it's good for 'em. The battle of Gaugamela…was, in essence, the launch of Operation Persian Freedom."[56] Russell similarly concludes that:

> Alexander…talks of liberating the people he invades; repeatedly, his men question the wisdom of an endless colonial war in a manner that seems to link Alexander's hubris to George W. Bush's attempts to 'liberate' the same peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq over 2000 years later.[57]

Specific details in *Alexander*'s narrative support such interpretations. Similar to Helen's abduction in *Troy*, Alexander's invasion was predicated on the grounds that it was in retaliation to former Persian assaults on Greek soil, as well as claims that the Persian king, Darius III, was behind Philip's murder (others believe Alexander's mother or even Alexander himself was behind it).[58] This recalls the argument that the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were predicated on the belief that the countries were connected to 9/11, harboured terrorists, and presented a future threat to the US and the West.

Alexander's life is undoubtedly a 'useable past', and Stone is well aware of cinema's ability to employ history as allegory and analogy: during an interview for *Time* magazine in 2007 he discussed plans to make a film about the My Lai massacre after continued revelations about prisoner abuse perpetrated by the US military during the War on Terror. He stated:

> Sometimes the best way to reflect on something is through parallel history. *Patton* came out during Vietnam; *Little Big Man* came out during Vietnam; *M*A*S*H** came out during Vietnam. They were all about other wars. Sometimes you can tell more about a war now by paralleling a previous war.[59]

Furthermore, in his documentary miniseries *The Untold History of the United States* (2012) he cites *Gladiator* as an allegory for American society. However, Stone has said of George W. Bush that he "couldn't despise a man more", and that such analogous readings of *Alexander* are "facile".[60] As with Petersen above, Stone confessed that contemporary events overtook the production:

> I started this thing before all this nightmare came down, this morass … It's ironic, and I think there is a coincidence that's far beyond my understanding, but I would certainly not limit this to the current situation. This is an older situation, East vs. West. This is pre-Muslim, and there was always a conflict between Persian and Greek.[61]

Occasionally, Stone would confront the issue of parallels between Alexander and Bush by emphasising the differences between them. Stone praises Alexander for integrating conquered armies into his own and offering them education, while criticising Bush for disbanding the Iraqi army following the invasion: a decision that led many of the newly unemployed Iraqi men to join the Fedayeen and fight against the US.[62] In other interviews he states that:

> Alexander was willing to change as he went East. As he went East, he became more Eastern. Whereas Bush is intractable, unable to evolve, to understand the Eastern mentality. Of course, he's not a frontline leader as Alexander was.[63]
>
> Alexander was not a materialist; he wasn't, despite any protestations of freedom, seeking to loot the resources of the East, such as oil, and gold, to bring to the West. Alexander is the only conqueror that I know of who stayed with the people that he conquered. To see this multiculturalist as a figure of maniacal proportions staggers me with its cynicism."[64]

As with Brad Pitt supporting Petersen's analogous reading of *Troy*, Colin Farrell (who portrays the titular Alexander) defended Stone's position: "The film was never made for the purposes of a correlation or to say anything about today's present state." This is echoed by the classics scholar Robin Lane Fox, historical advisor on *Alexander*, who states flatly: "At no point is his film a comment on what critics have described as 'Stone's USA', or on contemporary events."[65]

'Stone's USA' derives from the director's reputation, shaped by his body of work, in which his films are repeatedly set in twentieth century America and explore the country's relationship to issues of war, politics, violence, the media, and popular culture. His protagonists are often men in positions of power and influence, and Stone exhibits an apparent fascination with what creates, motivates, and ultimately destroys them. This is evidenced in works such as *Wall Street* (1987), *JFK*, *The Doors* (1991), and *Nixon* (1995). As with the reputation of the Trojan War as an analogue for American conflicts, an awareness of Stone's reputation could lead viewers of *Alexander* to presuppose the film will be about contemporary America in some way. Instead, Stone's long held interest in Alexander and his decision to make a film of his life appears to be inspired by the principal selling point of the epic film: it is an escape from the contemporary world into the past. In a documentary accompanying the US Ultimate Cut BluRay release, Stone's son asks him during production of *Alexander* why he is making a Greek epic when all his other films are about America. Stone responds: "I think American culture is uninteresting and dead.

Let's explore other cultures because, frankly, I prefer those worlds right now."[66] Later, in an interview for *Cinéaste* in 2005, Stone looks back at the project stating: "The process helped raise me out of the morass of the present world. It took me back in time to an ancient place where men had higher ideals and strived to execute them."[67]

Stone's interest in the project originated in his long-held fascination with ancient Greek culture, which included studying classical texts at school and taking a class on Greek mythology while at NYU's Film School in the early 1970s.[68] His films prior to *Alexander* contain numerous classical references – including to Alexander the Great in *The Doors*. Stone, like Petersen, also provides further credence to Russell's argument concerning the revival of the epic genre being rooted in baby-boom directors revisiting their childhood. He writes that in his youth he "eagerly lined up" for the epics *Helen of Troy*, *The 300 Spartans* and *Alexander the Great*, which he "loved … more for their blend of costume, sensual behaviour, and worship of strange gods than their success as dramas."[69] Stone exhibited further awareness of the genre's history during pre-production on *Alexander*, where he screened the Babylon sequences from D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) for his production designers to inform their creation of the Babylon set.[70]

Stone was first approached to make a film of Alexander's life in the late 1980s, but chose to postpone the project until he had further developed his skills as a filmmaker in the hope of making *Alexander* his "masterpiece".[71] During the 1990s and early 2000s he meticulously researched the topic while numerous other Alexander the Great projects circulated in Hollywood, helmed by the likes of Martin Scorsese, Baz Luhrmann and Mel Gibson.[72] However, Stone secured funding – largely from European backers – and finally moved into production on *Alexander* in September 2003.[73] Following the shoot, Stone's editing process was rushed due to studio desires to release the film in the US in November 2004 (January 2005 in the UK), perhaps intending for it to be an Oscar contender in a similar vein to *Gladiator*.[74]

Despite Stone's commitment, passion and knowledge of Alexander's history, the film was savaged by the majority of critics. The use of English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh and Eastern European accents to denote the characters' regional identity – similar to the aforementioned technique used in *Troy* – was lost on most reviewers who mocked

the performances and dialogue mercilessly.[75] Similar to Achilles and Patroclus in *Troy*, the portrayal of Alexander's relationship with Hephaestion also came under fire, and reiterates Nisbet's argument that 'Greek love' is anathema for mainstream audiences. Hephaestion, a childhood friend and general in Alexander's army, may or may not have been his lover, either when they were younger or throughout his life. Largely ignorant of the historical context, reviews criticised the film as either too coy in its depiction of Alexander's 'bi-sexuality' or too overt, depending on the audience.[76] Linked to this were complaints that Alexander was too fallible or emotional to inspire awe in his command. Stone has gone on to suggest that in the character's embodiment of East and West, masculine and feminine, and his open sexuality: "Americans, particularly teenage boys, were made uncomfortable by it, preferring their leads to be cast in the macho mold of Russell Crowe in *Gladiator* and Brad Pitt in *Troy*".[77] Furthermore, the film's length, structure, and almost impenetrable levels of historical detail were deemed to be alienating lay audiences. Jeanne Reames, for instance, concedes that the film is only for Alexander "geeks".[78] Ultimately, Gary Crowdus captures the general reception of *Alexander* as: "at best…a major disappointment, and at worse…a cinematic disaster."[79]

An additional difficulty that *Alexander* faced compared to other epics is the social status of the protagonist. In most ancient world epics, especially Roman epics, the hero is often a cog in a larger (imperialist) machine, but breaks free from this system to support a disenfranchised group. While Greek epics differ to Rome in a number of ways, on a basic level the recent examples of *Troy* and *300* see the Trojans and Spartans as defenders of 'freedom' from a larger invading army. In so doing, the films are in keeping with the Roman epics' depiction of disenfranchised groups standing up to an imperialist regime. Alexander, however, is a king who, on questionable grounds, invades another empire. Although he urges his men at Gaugamela to fight for "the freedom and glory of Greece", Thomas Harrison questions what 'freedom' he is actually referring to.[80] Along with his sexuality, the lack of clear motivation for Alexander's campaign may have limited an audiences' ability to identify or relate to Alexander. Harrison reasons:

> Contemporary heroes – even, or especially, in US movies – are the small man fighting against the system . . . no matter how one emphasises Alexander's happy-go-lucky spirit or the vast size of the Persian forces arrayed against him, it is hard . . . not to see him as a bully without a (sufficient) cause.[81]

Reames echoes this sentiment, citing *Gladiator*'s Maximus and *The Lord of the Rings*' (2001-2003) Frodo as audience favourites: "We prefer the underdog, the common-man hero, the one without pretensions . . . not the man who thinks himself the son of a god."[82]

Stone conceded that he "failed to communicate [Alexander's] story properly to that audience."[83] This inspired him to re-edit the film for its DVD release, releasing a shorter, restructured Director's Cut alongside the Theatrical Cut, which replaces some material with previously unseen scenes. In 2007, Stone then released *Alexander* Revisited: The Final Cut, which combined footage from both films with further restructuring to provide the longest version of the film to date. Thereafter deciding to refine this edit, in 2012 Stone issued *Alexander*: The Ultimate Cut (solely on BluRay and currently unavailable officially in the UK), which follows the same structure as the Final Cut but is slightly shorter. For the purposes of this essay, when I refer to *Alexander* and various sources on the film, they will all be in reference to the Theatrical Cut unless otherwise stated.

The chief difference between the Theatrical Cut and the subsequent cuts is in the film's structure. All versions open on Alexander's death, which cuts to the elderly Ptolemy, another of Alexander's generals and childhood friends, as he dictates a biography of Alexander's life to his scribe. In the Theatrical Cut this leads us into Alexander's childhood which follows key moments in his youth until skipping forward in time to the battle of Gaugamela: the defining encounter in which Alexander defeats the Persian King Darius III and subsequently enters Babylon to become the new King of Persia. The film then follows Alexander's campaigns through Iran, Afghanistan, across the Hindu Kush and into India until he is forced to turn back. While in India, Alexander murders one of his generals, Cleitus, which instigates a flashback to the murder of Philip. The weakness of this structure is that the film appears to begin as a chronological account of Alexander's upbringing in Greece, but then leaps forward to Gaugamela and follows his later life while skipping over much of his invasion and conquest of Persia – events which to many are what earned him the title 'Alexander the Great'. However, in the subsequent cuts Stone's intended structure becomes clear: Ptolemy's opening narration leads directly into the battle of Gaugamela and what follows becomes a clear chronological narrative about

his later life and expansion further East, including his eventual demise. During this narrative, the film occasionally flashes back to scenes from his childhood and youth which mirror events during the later chronology and suggest why he made the choices he did. Stone has called these scenes of Alexander's upbringing in Greece "parallel stories", and through this device we see the impact Alexander's warring parents had on shaping the man he would become. In the Theatrical Cut, these scenes are top-loaded into the opening forty-five minutes of the film. While the parallels between Alexander's early life – vital to our understanding of the film – can still be deciphered from this structure, it is made much clearer in subsequent edits, especially The Final Cut and The Ultimate Cut.

Gideon Nisbet has argued, however, that Stone's film is indebted to Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great*, calling *Alexander* a "quasi-remake" and a "remake-in-denial".[84] Rossen's film, like Stone's, was also written by its director and produced during a turbulent period of American history. In 1951 Rossen appeared before HUAC and was blacklisted after refusing to co-operate. He began researching Alexander's life and during the early scripting stage returned to the Committee in 1953, confessed his prior involvement with the Communist party, renounced them, and revealed other Hollywood figures with Communist sympathies.[85] Against this backdrop, *Alexander the Great* has also been read allegorically, such as Kim Shahabudin's conclusion that the film is Rossen's "comment on the failure of contemporary political ideals to fulfil their aims as they became twisted by the corruptions of power and the weakness of men."[86] Nisbet believes that both films dwell on Alexander's youth in Greece (something applicable to the Theatrical Cut but less so for subsequent edits), and foreground Alexander's relationship with his father as the predominant influence on his ambitions. The two works possess similar scenes, such as Philip's drunken banishment of Alexander after they argue at Philip's wedding, although as both films strove for historical accuracy and their writer-directors researched extensively it is unfair to claim plagiarism when both are depicting a scene recorded in Alexander's biographies. Both also use lines of dialogue taken from historical sources, although sometimes it is unclear whether a line is similar due to sources, plagiarism, or thematic coincidence. For example, in Rossen's film Philip warns a young Alexander that a king must "trust no-one and learn to be alone", while in *Alexander* he advises: "A king must know how to hurt those he loves. It's lonely…"

Fig.1.6: Philip shows the young Alexander a painting of the eagle pecking out Prometheus' liver in *Alexander*

Nonetheless, Nisbet's argument is flawed. Structurally the two films are remarkably different – even in the Theatrical Cut of *Alexander*. Almost half of Rossen's film is set in Greece, while only around forty-five minutes of Stone's (considerably longer) film takes place there. Rossen then focusses on Alexander's conquest of Persia, including the battle of the Granicus River, a montage containing the siege of Tyre and the Gordian knot, and culminating with his defeat of Darius at Gaugamela. The film covers his campaigns thereafter and his passage into India in the final twenty minutes of running time, coming to an abrupt end with Alexander's death. By complete contrast, Stone's film omits the events of Alexander's campaign into Persia prior to Gaugamela, and dedicates the rest of the running time after the battle to his campaign further east. While Rossen's Alexander is preoccupied with achieving his father's goals and surpassing him by becoming king of Persia, Stone's Alexander is motivated go "further than my father ever dreamed", driven by both a desire to surpass Philip, to create an ever-larger empire, but also to explore and unite various cultures: not simply to rule, like Rossen's conqueror. However, when Stone's broken and wounded Alexander emerges from his tent in India and informs his men they are returning home, he sees his father among the cheering crowds, and receives a nod of approval. In this touching moment, we understand that Alexander's ambition was

less to do with surpassing his father than it was to gain his respect. Considering the motivations of Alexander and the structures of the films, Nisbet's conclusion of the similarities between the two is overly simplistic. Furthermore, considering *Alexander* in relation to the combat film and to Stone's other films creates additional interpretations of the film's depiction of Alexander and Philip's relationship which further distinguishes it from Rossen's.

Parent/child relationships are a recurrent theme of Stone's work, evidenced in *Platoon* (1986), *Wall Street*, *Nixon*, *W.* (2008) and *Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps* (2010). While Stone's protagonists are often young males, their actions are influenced by their fathers, father-figures, and occasionally mothers. For example, the protagonists of *Platoon* and *Wall Street* (both played by Charlie Sheen) are each torn between two father figures: Elias and Barnes, and Carl and Gordon, respectively. The former of each pairing represents morality while the latter is its antithesis, with conflict ensuing as the young hero wavers between the two. In *Nixon* and *W.* the eponymous leaders are each depicted during difficult periods of their presidencies: Watergate and the invasion of Iraq, respectively. As the narrative of these events progresses, the films intercut the chronological events with scenes from the characters' younger days where the actions of Nixon's mother and Bush's father account for who the men would become. *Alexander* proceeds in a similar style, whereby the scenes set in Greece – whether as parallel stories or a chronological sequence – depict the conflict between Alexander's parents while the post-Gaugamela narrative reveals how Alexander's upbringing affected his motivations and decision making. Stone portrays the young Alexander as devoted to his mother, who in turn attempts to control and force him to be ruthless, cruel and ambitious. Philip detests Olympias and fears the influence she exerts over Alexander. However, Philip is a womanising, short-tempered drunk who publically insults Alexander's mother and banishes his son for defending her.[87] In a scene of Stone's invention, Philip shows the child Alexander a series of cave paintings depicting famous scenes from Greek mythology. He uses the examples to teach Alexander lessons about life and kingship. As Philip discusses his first experiences of battle we deduce that Philip's alcoholism may be a result of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) caused by his wartime experiences; this is an early hint of Stone's portrayal of war in the film, as will be explored below.

This scene in the caves introduces the motif of mythological narratives that permeates Alexander's story. Over the course of the narrative different events in his life mirror the various myths; for example, Alexander replays the myth of Oedipus when he marries Roxana, who looks and speaks like Olympius, and murders Cleitus, who was one of his father's closest generals. Chief among these mythological influences is Alexander's relationship to Prometheus. Stone associates Alexander's expansion into Asia and introduction of Greek culture to Persia and India as synonymous with Prometheus bringing fire to man; a civilising mission. Again, this could be read as an allusion to America and its allies bringing 'democracy' to Iraq and Afghanistan, but its layered significance within *Alexander* suggests such a basic, pro-Bush analogue was not Stone's intention. In the film, Prometheus' gift to man is tempered by his punishment, whereby he is chained to a rock to have his liver pecked out daily by an eagle. The myth acts as a warning of the suffering that accompanies great ambition and enterprise, and Stone's depiction of Alexander's campaigns takes particular interest in his suffering, hardships, and the limitations imposed on his ambition.

Tying Alexander's story to the Prometheus myth also relates an element of his suffering to the image of the eagle, which in Greek culture was a symbol of Zeus and was used on the first coins Alexander issued in Asia.[88] Accounts of Alexander's life, such as that by Lane Fox, also reference Alexander's belief – weighted by oracles – that Zeus was his real father, not Philip. *Alexander*, like *Troy*, is a euhemeristic depiction of Alexander's life but, also like *Troy*, Stone alludes to various legends which have developed. In the film, he utilises the symbol of Zeus' eagle and allusions to Prometheus to further explore Alexander's relationship to Philip. The eagle first appears when Alexander is a child and breaks in his horse, Bucephelus, much to the delight and pride of Philip. It is then seen flying over the Gaugamela battlefield observing the troop formations. Lane Fox has commented that it was Philip's creation of the disciplined Macedonian army and its revolutionary weapons and formations that were "the most immediate reason why Alexander ever became great."[89] Philip was himself a successful military leader, and the eagle's presence over the battlefield perhaps symbolises Philip watching over his son and the battle. Alexander then achieves Philip's dream of conquering Persia, but when he stands on its borders in the mountains of the Hindu Kush – observing a rock formation believed

to have been where Prometheus was chained – the eagle deserts him; now he must go on alone. Once Alexander crosses into India, the terrain becomes more difficult than ever, he faces mutinies, kills Cleitus, and is wounded in battle. When he emerges weak and injured from his tent and gives the order to return home his army cheer in jubilation, but he is devastated; he has learnt that being king is indeed to be alone. In this moment of realisation, his eagle returns and he glimpses his father's ghost among the crowds offering a nod of acceptance.

Fig.1.7: The eagle overseas the battle of Gaugamela in *Alexander*

Kristen Moana Thompson has misinterpreted the appearance of the eagle over the desert battlefield of Gaugamela as an allusion to contemporary warfare, in which high altitude cameras mounted on satellites, aircraft, and unmanned drones observe activity on the ground.[90] However, Stone implores viewers to take a different perspective:

> Too easily, with our twenty-first-century point of view, we also forget that war was different. Soldiers killed soldiers; generally, cities and civilians were spared . . . But today, war has become such a hideous affair of chemical and biological horror, and remote high-altitude-bombing destruction, wherein populations are destroyed in order to win them over . . . It requires mental discipline to keep Alexander in the context of his own time.[91]

While I disagree with Thompson's reading of the eagle in relation to the scenes of combat, *Alexander*'s battle scenes nevertheless carry elements which are evocative

of other wars. Specifically, the film evokes the Vietnam War combat film and incorporates the eagle and its connotations within the narrative to develop its portrayal of combat and Alexander's declining fortunes.

Despite the multitude of battles and sieges Alexander fought, only two are included in Stone's film. The first was a turning point in Alexander's campaign against Darius III when, after defeating him once at the battle of Issus, Alexander's small army met the largest army it would ever face at Gaugamela and defeated Darius a second time. The Persian king fled the battlefield and was later killed by his own men. The victory granted Alexander entry to Babylon, the Persian crown, control of the empire, and in the film it marks the high point of Alexander's life – but also the beginning of his decline. In Stone's depiction of the battle we see first-hand Alexander's ability as a commander and strategist. Stone creates sweeping overhead shots where the camera soars into the clouds alongside the eagle to reveal the scale of the encounter as well as Alexander's tactics in action. The editing cuts between the literal 'bird's eye view' and scenes of ground level combat, where Stone chokes the screen with clouds of sand and dust punctuated by bloody spurts and hacked limbs. Unlike the battle sequences in *Troy* and previous ancient world epics where the terrain is a backdrop to the human carnage, Stone depicts the terrain as an invasive entity that has an impact on how the soldiers fight and their commander's ability to oversee the battle.

Although Ptolemy's narration alludes to the guerrilla war Alexander fought through the mountains of Afghanistan, our next (and final) action sequence comes towards the end of the film in the jungles of India. Unlike Gaugamela, this sequence is not a reconstruction of a specific historical encounter but a composite of several battles Alexander fought during his campaign. The jungle setting creates a marked visual contrast to the barren desert of the first battle (the use of heavy foliage was also designed to limit the amount of extras and CGI needed for the sequence), and while elephants would have been used by the Persian army at Gaugamela, Stone saves them for this encounter.[92] During the sequence, Alexander leads a cavalry charge against a war elephant and is wounded by an arrow. The screen then becomes bathed in red light as Stone and cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto employ infrared film

stock to represent Alexander's shock, and the battle becomes increasingly bloody as he is lifted out of the mêlée on Achilles' shield.

Stone's construction of the India campaign is visually and thematically reminiscent of his depiction of the Vietnam War in *Platoon*. Over the introductory shots of Alexander's army in India, the voice-over provided by Ptolemy emphasises the difficulties the Macedonians faced in coping with the environment. Against shots of thick jungle where pouring rain turns the ground into a quagmire, lightning strikes a group of soldiers in an explosion of sparks similar to *Platoon*'s mortar rounds falling among the US soldiers. Ptolemy proceeds to describe the illnesses and snake bites suffered by Alexander's men, driving them to drink undiluted wine in the absence of clean water. This sequence vividly recalls *Platoon*'s depiction of the US soldiers in the mud and heat of the Vietnamese jungles and their increasing reliance on drugs or alcohol. The battle scene continues this comparison when the Indian army emerges suddenly out of the undergrowth and Alexander's cavalry are picked off by archers concealed in the trees like the Vietcong.

Alexander also echoes plot motifs from *Platoon* in its protagonist's relationship with paternal figures. In *Platoon*, Chris Taylor is caught between two antithetical father-figures in the form of Sergeant Elias and Sergeant Barnes. Elias takes Taylor under his wing and is a protective paternal figure until he is killed by the cruel and vicious Barnes. The ensuing tension builds until Taylor takes revenge on Barnes, killing him in an illustration of the film's message: in Vietnam, America fought itself. In the published screenplay for *Platoon*, Stone describes the warring figures of Elias and Barnes (in suitably classical terms) as illustrating antithetical views of war: "The angry Achilles versus the conscience-stricken Hector, fighting for a lost cause on the dusty plains of Troy."[93] Alexander also has multiple fathers: in a flashback to his assassination we see Philip embrace Cleitus and tell the young Alexander to "treat him as you would me." During the battle of Gaugamela Cleitus saves Alexander's life, remarking afterwards "your father still watches over you, boy." However, during the India campaign as Alexander and his men become increasingly drunk on the undiluted wine, Cleitus' xenophobic rants build to an embittered crescendo when he compares Alexander unfavourably to Philip. The editing assumes Alexander's drunken perspective and gives us a split second image of Philip standing in Cleitus'

place. When Cleitus insults Alexander's mother, the king erupts into a violent rage and spears him.

Fig.1.8: Alexander and his army move through the rain and thick jungles of India in *Alexander*

Alexander and Taylor are also linked through their experience of the *katabasis* narrative. This originates in classical Greek storytelling and can be seen in such texts as Homer's *Odyssey*. Its literal meaning is 'going down, a descent' and describes a character's journey into the underworld. Conventionally, this is in order to rescue someone, or to obtain an object or piece of knowledge. Holtsmark's summary of the *katabasis* is worth quoting in full, as it best describes the narrative's component parts:

> The entryway to the other world is often conceived as lying in caves or grottos or other openings in the earth's crust into the nether regions, such as chasms or clefts. Further, since that other world lies beyond a boundary separating it from our realm, such natural topographical delimiters as rivers, bodies of water, or even mountain ranges may be the physical tokens of demarcation. It is well known, for instance, that the underworld of classical mythology is penetrated by a number of rivers, most notably Styx and Acheron, which have to be crossed in a skiff punted along by the old ferryman Charon. The lower world is generally dank and dark, and the journey usually takes place at dusk or during the night. The realm itself is inhabited by the wealthy king and queen of the dead and by the innumerable spirits of the dead, by monsters (e.g., Cerberus) and evildoers (e.g., Tantalus) … The katabatic hero is often accompanied and helped by a companion [psychopompos] (who may be female) or by a loyal retinue of retainers, some or all of whom may be lost in the course of the journey so that the protagonist returns alone.[94]

Holtsmark describes how this feature has been used in a variety of film genres, including the sci-fi, western and combat film. In discussing the classical influences on Stone's films, Sheramy Bundrick argues that *Platoon* is essentially a *katabasis* narrative in its depiction of Taylor's descent into the hell of Vietnam.[95] *Alexander* echoes this, with the Hindu Kush marking the boundary of his descent, the quagmire of India being the underworld, the Indian army the evildoers, and his battle with the elephants being the monsters he encounters. A number of his men die in the campaign, and the experience culminates when he – like Taylor – is stretchered from the battlefield having gained an important piece of knowledge: he understands the limitations of his ambition and the loneliness of kingship. In obtaining this knowledge, Alexander is finally reconciled with his father.

Indeed, if we return to the issue of abandoned soldier-sons and father figures in the combat film we find that the tropes can be applied to *Alexander*. While his relationship with Philip is uneasy, during Alexander's youth he nevertheless had his father present and ready to offer advice. Following Philip's assassination, Alexander still had father figures in place in the form of Cleitus and the general Parmenion. However, as he moves into the mountains of Afghanistan and crosses the Hindu Kush, Alexander has Parmenion killed and, once in India, he murders Cleitus too. Symbolically, the eagle of Zeus/Philip watches over Alexander during his youth and on the plain of Gaugamela, but as he begins his *katabasis* narrative and crosses over the boundary line of the mountains, the eagle – his father(s) – abandons him. Alexander sinks into the Vietnam quagmire of his India campaign, but upon surviving and emerging as a wounded veteran he is, finally, reunited with his eagle. As with *Platoon* and Vietnam, Alexander's Indian campaign sees the men fighting among themselves, threatening to mutiny, embattled by the terrain and the enemy, and unable to find a worthwhile reason for their sacrifice. Stone is himself a Vietnam veteran and his own life experiences appear to have influenced how he depicts warfare; not only in the jungle environment but also at Gaugamela where the dust and sand are as much a combatant as the opposing army. Angelina Jolie, who plays Olympias in the film, even stated in an interview that Stone's wartime experience enabled him to depict *Alexander*'s battle sequences in a manner unlike other directors.[96]

A number of Iraq and Afghanistan War combat films released over 2005-8 drew similar parallels to the Vietnam War and reiterated the abandoned soldier-son/absent father figure trope. In depicting an East-West conflict partially set in an area of contemporary conflict with similar allusions to the Vietnam War, Stone may be using Alexander's story analogously. However, *Alexander*'s production history began before 9/11 when Stone was researching and writing his screenplay. As with *Troy*, the film would have been mid-way through pre-production and/or production as the situation in Iraq began to resemble Vietnam. Therefore, a logical conclusion is that apparent allusions or analogies to the contemporary conflicts are unlikely. However, Stone's personal experiences of war will have informed the way he depicts combat, and while he may not have intended to allude to Vietnam in his depiction of the *katabasis* section of the film, the similarities are writ large on screen.

Furthermore, while I reject interpretations of the film as an analogy for the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, this does not mean the film cannot be read allegorically. Regardless of whether Alexander's campaign into India is viewed as a 'civilising mission' or imperialist expansion, the *katabasis* sequence reveals that over-reaching can be the downfall of empire-building; especially when it involves a conflict in a remote country with alien terrain and hostile indigenous peoples. The message is applicable to Vietnam as well as other conflicts, including – but not specific to – Iraq and Afghanistan. However, I believe Stone intended the message to apply first and foremost to Alexander's own campaign. Throughout this analysis of the film I have quoted various responses from Stone to criticisms and interpretations of his film, and in each case his responses have cited further detail from Alexander's life. As noted, some critics complained about the volume of historical detail in the film, but in so doing Stone is essentially constructing what Daniel Herbert defined as 'anti-allegory'.[97] If this was Stone's aim he was not completely successful, as there remains an allegorical message embedded in the film through his employment of imagery and narrative motifs which stem from his prior experience with war and the combat film. Nevertheless, *Alexander*, while it deals with a variety of themes, is principally a film about Alexander the Great that engages with the history it depicts rather than with contemporary America.

That is not to say Stone's Alexander could not be regarded as being symbolically significant for the filmmaker. As Gary Crowdus states:

> One suspects that for Stone – as a member of the generation politically and culturally radicalized during the Sixties and whose adult lives have been defined by a sense of alienation from the US Government and most of its political leaders and policies – Alexander functions as a vehicle for his frustrated sense of idealism."[98]

While critics frequently questioned Alexander's 'greatness' as he is portrayed in the film, it is evident that Stone idolises his subject: he is the embodiment of Stone's 'frustrated sense of idealism'. Stone engages with the history on Alexander to construct his own biography of the ruler, and in so doing his role as filmmaker mirrors that of Ptolemy as narrator, as I will now explore.

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR As with Odysseus' narration in *Troy*, careful consideration of Ptolemy's role as narrator can influence the way we interpret *Alexander*. Historically, Ptolemy was one of Alexander's generals with whom he was raised, and he may even have been his half-brother. Ptolemy shared in his campaigns, and after Alexander's death he became Pharaoh of Egypt and started the Ptolemaic dynasty. While Pharaoh, he authored a biography on Alexander – as did more than twenty contemporaries – but this has been lost over time. Some of the information contained therein has reached us through references in subsequent biographies, although the wording has been changed.[99] Most of our surviving narrative sources on Alexander from the classical period were also intended for a Roman audience and, as Bowden notes, authored during a time of imperial rule wherein Alexander's empire-building would have been lauded and himself promoted as an exemplar for current and future Roman emperors.[100] The ambiguity that therefore surrounds the details of Ptolemy's biography allows Stone a degree of artistic licence in how he uses the device. In particular, few ancient biographers were interested in the childhood of their subjects, unlike modern biographers who often regard the "child as father of the man", to quote Lane Fox.[101] As discussed above in relation to *Nixon*, *Wall Street*, and *W.*, the influence of childhood and parental relationships are important features in the development of Stone's characters. While *Alexander* continues this trend, it differs in its use of the narrator as an additional storytelling device.

Stone and his producer, Thomas Schühly, decided to utilise a narrator after observing similar biographical films of larger-than-life characters and noting how a mediator enables the audience to relate to the eponymous protagonist, such as Salieri's role in *Amadeus* (1984) and Leland in *Citizen Kane* (1941).[102] *Alexander*'s Ptolemy is able to guide the audience through the conqueror's life and the historical context surrounding it, while simultaneously raising questions about the nature of historiography. *Alexander* opens with its eponymous character's death in Babylon surrounded by his generals, including the younger Ptolemy. As Alexander's hands fall he drops the ring given to him by Hephaestion which shatters on the floor in a subtle allusion to *Citizen Kane*'s opening scene involving a snow globe. The scene then cuts to the elderly Ptolemy in his adopted Egyptian home of Alexandria. From the balcony of its library he dictates a biography of Alexander to his scribe, Cadmus. This process forms the structure through which Alexander's life unfolds in the film, with Ptolemy's narration – either in voice-over or scenes set in Alexandria – uniting the non-linear narrative. However, the achronological approach heightens the viewer's awareness of the selective process of writing a history, and encourages the viewer to consider the significance of the moments in Alexander's life Ptolemy chooses to relate. As has become increasingly clear over Stone's evolving edits of the film, the 'parallel stories' depicting Alexander's early years offer what Lane Fox calls a "running psychological commentary" on the conqueror's development.[103]

Fig.1.9: The elderly Ptolemy dictates his biography of Alexander to his scribe in *Alexander*

The main action of the film can therefore be understood as a visualisation of Ptolemy's biography as it is being written and constructed, rather than Alexander's personal flashbacks. At times he appears to be conflicted as to whether Alexander was a man or a god, and as he works through his dichotomous thoughts we begin to see the creation of Alexander's myth. He skirts over controversial issues such as the destruction of Thebes and Persepolis and, as Ian Nathan states: "judges the frailties of the real man before carefully omitting such details from the record."[104] Furthermore, Ptolemy was not present to account for certain scenes, including that of Alexander and Philip observing the cave paintings under Pella. Nevertheless, the two are connected by a subtle line of dialogue whereby Alexander promises Philip: "One day I'll be on walls like these, father," which finds fulfilment in the Alexandrian library where a large mosaic of Alexander adorns Ptolemy's wall.

The aforementioned scenes mix various media (cave painting, mosaics, written and oral history) to encourage consideration of the intended meaning behind the creation of imagery and historical texts. This device is common to Stone's filmmaking style, which often uses rapid editing, canted angles, various film stocks, and pseudo-documentary and archive footage in provocative and thought-provoking ways that ask the viewer to question the authenticity of the footage on screen. This led to controversy surrounding the release of *JFK* where some critics raised fears that Stone was misleading audiences through his use of documentary and archive footage to blur the lines between 'fact' and fiction. However, as Robert Burgoyne writes:

> By focalizing the investigation . . . through an individual character, the powerful pseudo-documentary sequences that fill the film are rendered mainly as individual hypotheses, speculative possibilities, filtered through the mindscreen of an individual character.
>
> This is not to suggest that these sequences should be considered 'lies,' but rather that they unfold under an explicit narrative indication that they are speculative and hypothetical, that they are scenarios of what *may* have occurred.[105]

Using pseudo-documentary footage was not an option for *Alexander* without appearing wildly anachronistic, as Stone has admitted.[106] However, these issues of perspective, hypothesis, interpretation, and unreliability are raised in Ptolemy's narration. He becomes an embodiment of recorded history; Kim Shahabudin has pointed out that during his opening monologue Ptolemy stands next to a statue of Hermes, the Greek god of communication, and the sequence is set in a library where

oral, textual, and pictorial methods of recording history are represented.[107] Ptolemy's account is what Stone calls the "official version" of history; that written by the wealthy elites who have the time and resources to record and disseminate their accounts.[108] Stone's films exhibit a continual wariness surrounding "the power of corruption to rewrite history."[109] In Stone's film, Ptolemy even confesses to joining the other generals in poisoning Alexander in Babylon, before telling Cadmus to delete the revelation from the historical record and replace it with a statement that Alexander died of fever. As Joanna Paul states: "Stone dramatizes, instead of denying, one of the key features of the modern world's relationship with antiquity – the difficulty of uncovering verifiable truth under the layers of receptions piled up over the centuries."[110]

The vision of Alexander's life we see in *Alexander* is not that of the historical Ptolemy, but rather that of Stone. When questioned about Alexander's destruction of Thebes and Persepolis Stone quoted, nearly verbatim, Ptolemy's defence of Alexander's actions spoken in *Alexander*.[111] Both men create a history of a figure they love, face the issue of Alexander as man and myth, and both describe events they did not witness. In depicting Ptolemy as an unreliable narrator *and* an author of history, Stone encourages us to challenge the materials we encounter and the version of events we are presented – including his own. As with McCrisken and Pepper's analysis of *JFK*, in *Alexander* Stone: "calls upon audiences to take to task official versions of history and ask whether alternative versions might exist and, in fact, be more convincing."[112] Even in his depiction of ancient history, densely laden with historical detail, his work still contains a message relevant to contemporary society: as Stone himself advises: "Never base your views on one movie, one historian, one ideology, or one perception, no matter how seductive or convincing the messenger. Life is far too ambiguous."[113]

To call Stone's *Alexander* or Petersen's *Troy* an analogy for the invasions of Iraq and/or Afghanistan is to ignore the ambiguity the films exhibit in their depiction of warfare. Elements of either work can be read as allusions to, or analogies for, similar occurrences in the post-9/11 conflicts, but only in so much as they can also be applied to previous conflicts as well. *Troy* contains visual allusions to WWII and its

subsequent combat films, most notably to the 1944 D-Day landings. *Alexander*'s portrayal of the conqueror's Indian campaign contains visual and thematic allusions (including the absent father figure) to the Vietnam War and its combat films, and most specifically to Stone's *Platoon*. In each case, these similarities were either influenced by the filmmakers' prior experience in depicting warfare on film, or else they appear particularly prominent to us as viewers *because* of the filmmakers' prior relationship portraying those conflicts. Nevertheless, the filmmakers utilise their connections to these conflicts and others to critique warfare and imperialism. *Troy*'s nihilistic conclusion in which the majority of characters perish for no real moral or justified cause emphasises the senselessness of war. In *Alexander*, while the eponymous figure desires to create a utopia in which Greeks and Persians co-exist, his ambition and expansionist policies leads to prolonged scenes of violence, suffering, and eventually Alexander's death. Together, *Troy* and *Alexander* are anti-war films (despite the obvious contradiction of deriving thrilling spectacle from their depiction of warfare), which appeared timely and relevant to the contemporaneous conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan but exhibit no clear material suggesting their message is specific to those events.

In promoting his film, Petersen nevertheless attempted to emphasise the similarities between *Troy*'s narrative and Bush's expansionist foreign policy. However, he acknowledges that he, his cast and crew, and writer David Benioff did not set out to create an analogy for the Iraq or Afghanistan Wars. Rather, the film's anti-war/anti-imperialist message was applicable to contemporary events, and therefore allowed parallels to be drawn. Stone, by contrast, repeatedly attempted to disregard and downplay comparisons between his film and contemporary events. On the occasions where he did draw comparisons, though, it was in order to contrast Alexander's actions to those of Bush and the invasion of Iraq, rather than identify similarities. For Stone, his historical subject was his focus and not contemporary America.

While the films provide limited insight into the social and political period in which they were made, they both engage in historical debates surrounding the issue of recording history. *Troy*'s engagement with this aspect is only minor, but in bookending the film with short speeches by a veteran soldier the narrative becomes a war story told from one man's perspective in an allusion to the oral roots of the

Trojan War narrative. He ponders how his story will be remembered in years to come, and in turn we as viewers are encouraged to consider the multiple interpretations of the same narrative that exist, including both Homer's *Iliad* and *Troy* itself. By comparison, Stone engages in far greater depth with the issue of recording history through the character of Ptolemy. His dictation of Alexander's biography to his scribe, in which he wilfully alters the truth, offers his own interpretation of events, and seemingly creates scenes he was not present to witness begs the viewer to challenge the idea of written history being better than, or of greater value to, the filmic history Stone is creating. While one could read this as a timely message about believing the account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars being propagated by the US government and media at the time of *Alexander*'s production and release, it can similarly be read as a universal message applicable to any form of historical document. The latter seems the more likely case, as the theme has been a recurrent part of Stone's filmmaking for a number of years.

The depictions of warfare, invasion and imperialism common to the combat film have, in these films, been adapted to the aesthetic and themes of the ancient world epic. In so doing, the films have become generic hybrids, and can be read as offering an allegorical message about the trauma of war and the dangers of imperialism. In the next chapter we see that subsequent films in this cycle set in ancient Greece adopt a radically different aesthetic approach to visualising history and myth. Nevertheless, they continue the same themes of warfare, familial relationships and, in the case of *300*, the role of the unreliable narrator. As with *Troy* and *Alexander*, these films also become generic hybrids, merging elements of the ancient world epic with both the combat film and comic book movie.

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[1] Thomas Harrison, "Oliver Stone, *Alexander*, and the Unity of Mankind," in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History, and Cultural Studies*, ed. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 233.
[2] Oliver Stone, Afterword in *Responses to Oliver Stone's Alexander: Film, History, and Cultural Studies*, ed. Paul Cartledge and Fiona Rose Greenland (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 337-351.
[3] Wolfgang Petersen quoted in Martin M. Winkler, introduction to *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 8.
[4] David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 47, 50.
[5] David A. Gerstner, "The Practices of Authorship," in *Authorship and Film*, ed. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 10.

[6] Janet Staiger, "Authorship Approaches," in *Authorship and Film*, ed. David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 35; Barry Keith Grant, introduction to *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 2.
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[24] Kim Shahabudin, "From Greek Myth to Hollywood Story: Explanatory Narrative in Troy," in *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 109.
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[42] Ibid. 181-2.
[43] Ibid. 167, 180-1; in Martin M. Winkler's introduction to this volume (p.2), he notes that one edition of Homer's *Iliad* (Stanley Lombardo (trans). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997) actually features a photograph of the D-Day landings on its front cover.
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Chapter Two – Gods and Monsters: Fantasy in *300* (2007), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Immortals* (2011) and *Wrath of the Titans* (2012)

> It is Miller's work of the same name that inspired director and co-writer Zack Snyder to come up with this epic piece of comic-book mythologizing, both stylized and stylish, that is one of those films you don't want to think too hard about.[1]

The worldwide commercial success of Zack Snyder's *300* (2007) marked a turning point in the renaissance of the ancient world epic. Previous epics, such as *Gladiator* (2000), *Troy* (2004) and *Alexander* (2004) had predominantly been created through set and location-based shoots which were supplemented by CGI to recreate buildings and enlarge crowd scenes. In *300*, however, the actors performed on a soundstage with minimal set design against large blue-screens which would become the world of ancient Greece through digital manipulation. Not only were the landscapes, buildings, and in some cases characters created from CGI, but the film also differentiated from its predecessors by mythologizing a historical event rather than euhemerising a legend. Such was the commercial and cultural impact of *300* that it invited imitation in subsequent epics including *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), *Immortals* (2011), and the television series *Spartacus* (2010-13). Furthermore, if one acknowledges the ancient world epics released beyond the parameters of this thesis it is evident that *300*'s influence on the genre continues. To fully appreciate the film's influence, we must dismiss Kenneth Turan's vignette, quoted above, and explore the film in depth.

Although *300* went into production in 2005, director Zack Snyder had previously sought investment in the project in 2003 but was turned down by the major studios. Their reasoning, according to Snyder, was that the model for a successful ancient world epic was not yet "broken" and therefore there was no market for his radical reimagining of the genre.[2] This corresponds with Kitses' argument that genre cycles often respond to a successful release by reiterating features that proved popular with audiences in subsequent films.[3] However, as Blanshard and Shahabudin have noted, successive films in a genre can reiterate elements of their predecessors but they also need to provide something new to "pique the viewer's interest and distinguish them from their predecessors and competitors."[4] *Troy*, *Alexander*, *King*

Arthur (2004) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) imitated the basic model laid down by *Gladiator*, in that they are dramas, depicting events as if they are authentic history, and feature spectacle derived from practical action, sets, and crowd scenes expanded through use of CGI. Their lacklustre performance at the US box office, however, would encourage studios to experiment with alternate approaches to the genre; including Snyder's. Indeed, an unnamed studio executive at Warner Bros. was quoted in *Variety* as stating their main concern in marketing *300* was "whether we could render this story in a way that would separate it from *Troy* and *Alexander* and link it with the graphic novel pedigree."[5] In *300*'s aesthetic, marketing, and sources we can therefore observe a shift in the ancient world epic towards actively incorporating other genres into its design rather than the discrete amalgamation of the combat film into *Troy* and *Alexander*.

As will be discussed, *300*'s aesthetic was predominantly inspired by its graphic novel source. However, the film also owes a significant debt to its generic genealogy. Somewhat unusually, its lineage lies less with the Hollywood epic cycle of the 1950s-60s than with a group of Italian-produced films from that era: the *pepla*. While American-produced Greek epics of the 1950s-60s generally focused on Greek history, epic poetry, or tragedy, the *pepla* favoured depictions of mythology and fantasy set in the ancient world. Although this is usually Greece – as post-WWII Italy sought to distance itself from the fascist iconography of Mussolini and Rome – their *mise-en-scéne* is invariably a pastiche of ancient iconography which could represent a range of cultures and locations depending on the story, characters, or the language into which the film is dubbed.[6] At the *peplum* cycle's height, ten percent of the Italian film industry was involved in producing them and over 170 were made between the late 1950s and early 1960s.[7] Unlike their more serious-minded Hollywood counterparts, the *pepla* are conventionally low-budget B-movies designed for younger audiences attending drive-ins and exploitation cinemas. The sun-soaked locations, action, and kitsch qualities provided escapist entertainment for post-WWII, Cold War audiences, while the emphasis on sport and the athletic male body promoted health and masculinity.[8] For certain audiences, the depiction of the male body was also symbolic; the hero's ability to solve problems through his physical prowess (they were often played by bodybuilders) was evocative of a traditional, rural existence in the films' native Italy where post-war societies were rapidly

evolving through industrialisation.[9] Despite this, the *pepla* were rarely analogies for contemporary events, with only occasional entries in the cycle containing material relevant to contemporaneous issues. One such example is *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961), in which the hero must find the ancient sunken kingdom to prevent the destruction of the world using the blood of the Greek god, Uranus: an analogy for Uranium and the Cold War fear of a nuclear holocaust.[10] Nevertheless, in *300*'s mythologizing of history and prioritising of the male form, we can attribute its influence to both its graphic novel source and its cinematic lineage.

Discussion of *300* at its time of release was not restricted to its aesthetic or its approach to genre. Some commentators, including Richard Corliss, Tom Holland, and Gideon Nisbet, have interpreted aspects of the film as reflecting US involvement in Iraq, while the Cultural Advisor to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Javad Shamaqdari, regarded the film as anti-Iranian US propaganda.[11] Indeed, *300*'s depiction of an iconic battle between East and West was timely, especially as Spartan culture and the battle of Thermopylae have developed layers of meaning and connotation over time. However, the validity of analogous and allegorical interpretations of *300* relating the film to the Iraq War and tensions with Iran can be challenged through analysis of the film and its sources. To begin, one must contextualise the film within the history of the Spartan mythos as a political analogue, as well as the representation of Greek history and mythology on screen. The majority of this chapter will therefore be an extended case study of *300*, while in the closing section I discuss *300*'s impact on subsequent ancient world epics.

SPARTA – A HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION Based on Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's 1998 cult graphic novel of the same name, *300* is a reimagining of the 480 BC battle of Thermopylae in which a small Greek force attempted to defend a narrow coastal path from Persian invasion.[12] The conventional account of this event cites a series of religious celebrations occurring at the time of the invasion which forbade large numbers of soldiers from leaving their respective cities. However, a small army of a few thousand men (numbers vary from source to source) led by a Spartan king, Leonidas, and his bodyguard of three-hundred men took a defensive position at Thermopylae to halt the Persian advance until the Greeks had assembled. Estimates

of the size of the Persian force, led by King Xerxes, vary wildly, but sources are consistent in stating they greatly outnumbered the Greeks.[13] Nevertheless, they repelled the Persians for almost three days. Their demise came when they were betrayed by a local man, Ephialtes, who informed the Persians of a path that led to the rear of the Greek position and enabled them to be surrounded. Although most of the Greeks retreated when Ephialtes' betrayal was discovered, the surviving Spartans and a few Greeks stood fast and fought to the death. Almost immediately after the event, the defence of Thermopylae – and specifically the Spartan role in the battle – became enshrined as a heroic final stand that has echoed through history in events such as the fall of the Alamo and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Matthew Trundle, for example, cites an article in the *New York Herald* of 12th July 1876 which said of Custer: "the deeds of our young captain are worthy of as much honour as those of Leonidas and will be remembered as long."[14] More recently, the Spartan defence of Thermopylae is referenced by the protagonist of *The Last Samurai* (2003) during a similar final stand made by a small, outnumbered force. In Nisbet's words, Thermopylae: "has famously stood as the West's all-purpose ennobling analogy of military confrontation against the odds."[15]

References to Sparta have been a recurrent feature of Western thought for centuries, largely owing to what the French scholar François Ollier called *le mirage Spartiate* – the 'Spartan mirage'.[16] This is an idealised – verging on mythical – representation of ancient Sparta promulgated in art and literature which arguably began with the so-called father of history, Herodotus. Writing shortly after the Persian Wars, he glorifies and aggrandises the role played by the Spartans in the defence of Thermopylae, and repeatedly references their fighting prowess. For example, in the struggle against the elite Persian troops, the Immortals, he says the Spartans "made it quite clear that they were the experts, and that they were fighting against amateurs."[17] Herodotus' history derives from oral, poetic, and rhetorical traditions, with many sections likely presented as lectures before being written down.[18] Historian Tom Holland has noted how Herodotus' account of Thermopylae is "replete with hints of the Homeric," and contributed to the birth of the 'Spartan mirage'.[19] Furthermore, John Dillery explains that the almost mythic praise Herodotus' gives to the Spartans at Thermopylae is the result of "cognitive dissonance": because the war against Xerxes was ultimately a success for the

Greeks, Herodotus regards all the encounters leading to the final victory as contributions to the end result.[20] He can therefore depict Thermopylae as a moral(e) victory which helped inspire the Greeks to fight on against the Persians. For Paul Cartledge, Xerxes' invasion of Greece is a crossroad in human history; had the Persians conquered Greece at this time, he believes Western civilisation as we know it today may not exist.[21] This echoes the sentiment of Nobel-prize winning author William Golding, who said of Thermopylae: "A little of Leonidas lies in the fact that I can go where I like and write what I like. He contributed to set us free."[22]

While this is somewhat of an exaggeration, the Spartan's sacrifice in defending Thermopylae has nonetheless been associated with the founding of Western civilisation. In particular, the issue of whether the Spartans knew – or suspected – that they were going to their deaths at Thermopylae refigures the event into a suicidal act in the defence of Western ideology. *300* certainly reflects this perspective in the film, reiterating the fact that the Spartans who accompanied Leonidas all had male heirs to continue their names, as well as in the farewell scene between Leonidas and Gorgo where melancholy music and longing looks between the couple suggest it is the last time they will see each other. What make this potentially significant for this study is, as Cartledge notes, that in the years following 9/11 interest in Sparta among the academic community increased, including to the Spartan sacrifice at Thermopylae being an act of ideological suicide.[23] Following the ideological suicide of the 9/11 hijackers – however corrupt that ideology may be – Cartledge notes that scholars have been debating whether Western values today are worthy of such sacrifice.[24]

However, the details of the battle of Thermopylae have been extensively questioned and rewritten by historians. Christopher Matthew responds directly to Cartledge in arguing that it was not a "token position" designed to stall the Persian advance, but rather it was meant to halt it indefinitely.[25] Citing Diodorus and Herodotus, Matthew suggests Leonidas was defending Thermopylae with a small force until reinforcements arrived, but the insufficient numbers under his command led to the force being defeated.[26] He also argues that the conventional narrative's point that the Carneia prevented a larger Spartan force being sent to Thermopylae was a later addition to historical accounts to disguise the miscalculation of numbers consigned

to the defence by the Congress of Corinth.[27] Finally, Matthew calls the idea of Leonidas taking his personal bodyguard of three-hundred men "a prime example of a 'romanticised' legend replacing historical fact."[28] He reasons that while the men chosen did have male heirs, this was because they were older and more experienced soldiers, not because they thought they were going to die. Matthew concludes by arguing that references to units of three-hundred Spartans performing a "special assignment" occur in numerous ancient sources in relation to different missions, suggesting that rather than being Leonidas' bodyguard, the three-hundred may have simply been a standard company in the Spartan military, reminiscent of contemporary special forces team.[29]

Nevertheless, while historians continue to debate the minutiae of Thermopylae, the conventional narrative of the battle and the 'Spartan mirage' has endured. This has led Sparta's reputation and mythos as a militaristic superpower to be appropriated by numerous groups throughout history, up to and including more recent times. Prior to WWII, the Nazi party had likened itself to Sparta as they shared an adherence to martial culture and eugenics, while in Britain similar comparisons between Sparta and the Nazis were drawn to condemn their militaristic, fascist views.[30] Elsewhere, in political rhetoric of the post-war years America began to liken Russia to Sparta; although this was largely a by-product of self-analysis in which America was likened to Athens during the Peloponnesian War, and thus Russia became Sparta as an extension of the analogy.[31] However, the analogy could be applied in multiple configurations, with some political commentators at the time equating the militarised Sparta with the American military-industrial complex.[32] Some interpretations of *300*'s Spartans have even harkened back to this period: Jeffrey Richards, for example, has argued that the film's depiction of exposure (leaving babies to die in the wilderness if they do not appear to be healthy), training boys as soldiers from a very young age, and the focus on displaying the athletic male form recalls the Nazi programme of eugenics, the Hitler Youth, and the Aryan ideal of masculinity, respectively.[33] Miller, aware of the antithetical connotations of Sparta, stated of his depiction:

> In many ways [the Spartans] were fascist, but they were the bulwark against the fall of democracy…I didn't want to render Sparta in overly accurate terms, because ultimately I do want you to root for the Spartans…I made them as cruel as I thought a modern audience could stand.[34]

In embracing the dichotomy between historical Sparta and the 'Spartan mirage', Miller's *300* differs from one of its key inspirations: Rudolph Maté's *The 300 Spartans* (1962). Miller cites the film as an influence not only on *300* but on his work in general, as he vividly remembers a childhood viewing of the film which profoundly affected him when he saw that the heroes of a story could die.[35] Despite its unconventional ending, *The 300 Spartans* was nevertheless a Hollywood production that reiterated numerous tropes from the ancient world epic, including the heroic group threatened by a tyrannical empire. The film is unlike many of its Roman counterparts in that it depicts actual warfare rather than a symbolic conflict such as that between Christians and Rome in *The Robe*. Nevertheless, *The 300 Spartans* has still attracted analogous and allegorical interpretations, with Richards and Blanshard and Shahabudin arguing that the film must be viewed in relation to the Cold War.[36] In it, the American-accented Spartans side with the English-accented Athenians to fight an Eastern superpower in order to safeguard their freedom; a basic analogy for America and Britain's Cold War with Russia.[37] This can also be expanded to an allegory, as Lynn Fotheringham suggests, in which the film embodies the fight for freedom against a totalitarian power.[38] This is summarised in the film's closing narration, which asserts that the battle of Thermopylae is evidence of what: "a few brave men can accomplish when they refuse to submit to tyranny."

Fig.2.1: Leonidas and the three-hundred Spartans at Thermopylae in Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's *300*

The symbolic importance in *The 300 Spartans* and *300* to freedom from slavery and tyranny is ironic. The Persian Empire was, in many ways, remarkably free during the Achaemenid Empire (including under Xerxes and later Darius III), as it was essentially a multicultural empire wherein the people lived by their own beliefs and practices, with their only obligation being adherence to laws, payment of taxes, and contributing to the king's army.[39] While the historical Sparta did not buy and sell slaves like other Greek cities, they nonetheless relied upon an enslaved local population for manual labour: the helots.[40] Sparta's military prowess – which is showcased at Thermopylae – derived from the necessity to train their citizens for warfare in the event of a helot uprising, as occurred throughout Spartan history. However, the time to train was afforded to the Spartans as they did not have to spend hours in the fields as most Greek citizen-soldiers did, because the helots performed those tasks.

The omission of the helots aids in simplifying the complexities of Spartan society for audience comprehension, and is one element in how *The 300 Spartans* and *300*

(novel and film) employ simplification and modernisation (or even Americanisation) of history to aid audience comprehension, sympathy, and emotional involvement. These alterations to history also circumvent many of the pitfalls Nisbet has identified as commonly associated with the Greek epic. For example, historically, Sparta was ruled by a complex mixed-constitution designed to prevent any single person or body from having absolute power. The state had two kings drawn from opposing households who were ultimately answerable to the Ephors, a respected and elected body of five elders – not the decrepit creatures seen in *300*. The kings and Ephors relied on the support of the Gerousia, an elected group of twenty-eight officials who would make decisions before the Assembly.[41] *The 300 Spartans* embraces this concept of duel kingship but both Miller and Snyder depict Sparta as having a single king (although Theron in Snyder's film fills the role, if not by name or title, of a rival Spartan king). *300*'s Leonidas acts as a figure-head, similar to a president, who adheres to a small group of elders and a body of representatives in a 'council' that closely resembles a Roman (or American) senate.

Similarly, while women in Sparta could own land and were arguably given greater freedom than those in other Greek states, they were still subservient to patriarchal dominance.[42] Those in *The 300 Spartans* and *300* appear to be respected, if not viewed entirely equal, but in the case of Snyder's Gorgo they can also have their voices heard in the political arena. The little we know about Gorgo derives from Herodotus, who praises her ingenuity and influence over Sparta's leaders.[43] The expansion of Gorgo's character in Snyder's film seems partly to counterbalance the film's violence and hyper-masculinity to appeal to female audiences. By removing many of the historical restrictions on her lifestyle, modern western viewers are more likely to identify with her character. Indeed, the film expands her role, gives her greater characterisation and agency, and heightens her romantic relationship with Leonidas. After test screenings with female audiences proved overwhelmingly positive, *300*'s US distributor, Warner Bros., bought advertising space during primetime shows with principally female fan-bases, such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-).[44]

The emphasis given to Gorgo and her relationship to Leonidas in Snyder's *300* also engages with an aforementioned pitfall in Hollywood Greek epics: if and how to

represent homosexual relationships. Although debates still surround the exact politics of Spartan sexuality – something complicated by the lack of surviving Spartan literature – Cartledge describes the Spartan system as including pederastic relationships between young males undergoing the *agoge* (the training regime) and slightly older males. This latter group is believed to have been those aged approximately nineteen or twenty who were in limbo between completing the *agoge*, marrying, and being initiated into the military.[45] The bonds these relationships create may have continued during military service. *The 300 Spartans*, like Rossen's *Alexander the Great*, completely omitted any suggestion of homosexual relationships between the Greeks. *300*, however, garnered various claims of blatant homoeroticism in its depiction of the Spartans. Unlike the armour-clad soldiers of history and *The 300 Spartans*, Miller's source novel glorifies the male body by depicting the soldiers training and fighting nude. His inspiration came from the Greek tradition of 'heroic nudity', stating: "what I did was an evocation. It was not a history piece. I stylized the living hell out of it. I made the Greeks look like they do on the sides of their bowls."[46] In bringing this to the screen, Snyder's Spartans are physical exemplars of the athletic male body. This led critic Mark Kermode to joke that the film is undeniably homoerotic in its depiction of "well-oiled men in their pants shouting at each other", while Lev Grossman, writing for *Time*, believes that the male nudity was intended to attract homosexual audiences to the film.[47] Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* similarly states that the film is highly self-aware of its own homoeroticism, while Richard Corliss calls it a "romp in Homer eroticism."[48]

However, the film is also contradictory and appears at times to assert the heterosexuality of its Spartan characters. For example, Leonidas dismisses the Athenians as "philosophers and boy-lovers", suggesting through his tone that Spartans are neither. Before he leaves for Thermopylae there is an extended sex scene between Leonidas and Gorgo, which is only implied in the graphic novel. In the commentary track on the DVD, Snyder has stated that his aim in the choreography of the sex scene was to make it like a wrestling match; the strength of will and desire for control in both characters is reflected in their ferocious lovemaking, while Leonidas' thrusts and the positions they adopt emphasise his dominance and aggression.[49] By contrast, Xerxes use of make-up, jewellery, his semi-nude form, and his request for Leonidas to submit to him carries even greater

effeminate and homoerotic connotations. According to Snyder, this was designed to make the young male heterosexual audience members feel uncomfortable, which suggests he does not intend the Spartans to be viewed in a homoerotic way.[50] When questioned, however, Snyder stated that he regards *300* to be neither homophobic nor homoerotic, but that audiences can interpret it either way.[51]

A number of reviews refer to the physical appearance of the actors, especially those playing the Spartans, while interviews with the stars often discussed their training regime – ahead of, or instead of, discussing anything approaching analogous or allegorical readings.[52] This focus on bodily perfection and fitness regimes plays to American sports culture, the popularity of publications such as *Men's Health*, and the contemporary trend of narcissism involved in gym membership and self-photography to showcase one's physique – as well as homosexual interest in the male body. However, *300* also owes much of its visual glorification of the male form to the *pepla*, which similarly emphasised the physicality of the bodybuilders – such as Reg Park, Steve Reeves and, later, Arnold Schwarzenegger – who played such mythical heroes as Hercules.[53] Blanshard and Shahabudin have contrasted the Hollywood ancient world epic from the Italian *pepla* in the physical form of its male hero, noting that in the former: "he has a well-built but not overly muscular torso, distinguishing the epic heroes from those of the *pepla*, where the heroes are defined by their extreme muscular development."[54] The *pepla* cycle was embraced by the homosexual community during the 1950s-60s due to their emphasis on the male form. This connection stemmed in part from a Victorian tradition of displaying male bodybuilders in classical costume to lend the act of voyeurism a sense of historical merit.[55] Bodybuilding magazines from the 1950s reiterated this, and were simultaneously popular with the (underground) homosexual community which, in the late 1960s, included a *peplum* in a showcase of gay cinema.[56] Wyke has noted that in *pepla*, physical strength is associated with goodness and heroism, and: "a seemingly natural link was forged between muscularity, masculinity, justice and the supremacy of the West", as Hercules (or a similar hero) would regularly fight an Asiatic 'Other'.[57] As the next section of this chapter will discuss, these themes are vital to understanding *300*'s visuals and meaning.

In tracing this history of political analogues, cinema, literature and meaning we arrive at Snyder's *300*. Primarily based on the graphic novel, the film follows the narrative as it was created by Miller over referring to historical sources, literature, or scholarly histories. Its visual design is heavily inspired by – and in places directly drawn from – the graphic novel source, creating a hybridisation of ancient world epic and comic book conventions. This affects how we interpret the film's plotting: for example, *300*'s simplification of history could be construed as either circumventing the issues of political and geographical complexities commonly associated with Greek epics, or else it could be a product of the graphic novel's need to transmit its narrative through a limited amount of images and accompanying text. In short, the film is an exceptional example of remediation – the transfer of a story from one medium to another – in that it is based on a graphic novel, which is based on a film, which is based on historical sources, which are based on an oral tradition derived from an event, all of which have been subjected to various shifting ideologies and cultural values which have altered or accumulated over time. To quote Cyrino: "Snyder's film is simply one more stratum in the process of a reception that is hundreds of years in the making."[58] With this weight of symbolic, ideological, analogous and allegorical meaning invested in representations of Sparta, it is little wonder that audiences, scholars and critics seemed primed to look for subtextual meaning in Snyder's *300*.

Fig.2.2: Leonidas and the three-hundred Spartans at Thermopylae in *300*

ANALOGY, ALLEGORY OR PROPAGANDA Critics in the mainstream US and UK media were quick to attribute contemporary meaning to *300*.[59] Indeed, comparisons to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were easily found in the film's depiction of a violent encounter between East and West. The film has a clear ethnic and cultural dichotomy between the opposing forces, with the Greeks' semi-nude appearance emphasising their white skin compared to the black or Hispanic actors portraying the Persians, who are also dressed in a variety of ethnically 'Other' styles of Asian and African clothing. Furthermore, the Persian Empire in 480 BC encompassed present-day Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Eqypt, and parts of Afghanistan, allowing for obvious parallels to contemporary conflicts. The simplified historical narrative of *300* also appears to concur with the basic 'narrative' of the invasion of Iraq: in Richard Corliss' words: "Over the protests of the highest government (the Ephors or the UN), a commander-in-chief goes to war with an undersize army against a formidable Middle-Eastern power."[60] Equating Iraq to a "formidable Middle-Eastern power" over-estimates the country's military strength somewhat. The Iraqi army potentially outnumbered the allied invasion, but following the calamitous war against Iran in the 1980s and the First Gulf War, Iraq's military was badly antiquated and unable to mount a proper resistance to the technologically superior coalition invasion force. In many areas resistance dissipated before the coalition even arrived.[61] Richard Lock-Pullan has noted that US tactics in Iraq were informed by the experience of Vietnam and favoured movement, speed, and qualitative strength – including extensive use of Special Forces – rather than quantity.[62] This supports Corliss' comparison, though, as the three-hundred Spartans are portrayed as a small, elite unit. Unlike *The 300 Spartans*, however, *300* gives minimal acknowledgement to the Greek allies and depicts the defence of Thermopylae as almost solely a Spartan action. This could be construed as a reflection of the US role in the invasion of Iraq, as historian John Keegan has argued that the American military undertook the majority of fighting and the conflict was ultimately a US victory.[63] Furthermore, according to Keegan 9/11 forced America to acknowledge those beyond its own borders while also making them distrustful of others, placing "the defence of America first and foremost…[while] henceforth friendship would not be taken on trust. It would have to be proved."[64] Of the Greek allies, only the Arcadians are featured in *300* where they are described by Dilios, the narrator, as

“brave amateurs.” If indeed an analogy, *300* appears to be lauding the American role in Iraq while denigrating the efforts made by their allies.

Snyder’s film also features sequences which do not derive from Miller’s source novel. These include a scene in which the Spartans discover the burning ruins of a Greek village raided by the Persian Immortals. After finding a footprint from an Immortal which reveals claw-like extensions around the toes, a young Greek girl emerges through the smoke and collapses into Leonidas’ arms. As she dies, the men discover the rest of the villagers have been nailed to a tree in a nightmarish gothic tableau. In his commentary track, writer Kurt Johnstad states that he created this sequence at the behest of the studio, who asked for a symbol of the Persian advance into Greece, while the ‘tree of the dead’ visual was inspired by a similar incident that occurred during the conflict in the Balkans.[65] In so doing, this counterbalances the jingoistic brutality of the Spartans by rendering their actions as a defensive manoeuvre directed towards an invading army perpetrating violence towards civilians on Greek soil. This sequence could therefore be read as an analogy for America’s retaliatory reaction to 9/11, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were supposedly justified as being.[66]

Fig.2.3: The Tree of the Dead in *300*

The film, like its source, clearly condones Leonidas' actions and could therefore be interpreted as supporting the Bush administration's actions surrounding the invasions of Iraq and/or Afghanistan. Nisbet, for instance, humorously summarises: "Leonidas' heroes just so obviously were Pentagon hawks, and any Spartan who wasn't (the Ephors, Theron) was quickly shown up as a traitorous, cheese-eating surrender monkey."[67] Likewise, the film glorifies the Spartan's martial prowess in decimating the Persian army through extended montages of CGI-enhanced bloodletting; so much so that Holland has cited the film as a "contemptuous skewering" of the typical war-is-hell perspective of Hollywood combat films like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), adding:

> the current state of political divisions in America being what they are, it is hard to imagine a film more calculated to induce the vapors among sensitive liberals, or to provoke wild whoops of delight from among the ranks of the gung-ho.[68]

As with *Troy* and *Alexander*, events receiving extensive media coverage contemporaneous with *300*'s release influenced its reception. The film opened in most territories in March or April of 2007, unintentionally coinciding with President Bush's announcement that another 4,700 troops were being sent to Iraq only two months after an additional 21,000 had been committed to combat growing violence.[69] While *300*'s production precedes this policy, its depiction of a Western army devastating its Eastern opposition essentially replicates the message being espoused by the White House in committing further forces in a 'surge' towards victory. Furthermore, *300* concludes with Dilios leading the charge of thousands of allied Greeks and Spartans against the Persians at the battle of Plataea, where Xerxes' army was defeated. After the sacrifices of the initial troops in Iraq – like Leonidas and his three-hundred – the second assault would supposedly ensure US success in the conflict.

March 2007 also saw an international crisis in which British Naval servicemen and women had been captured and temporarily detained by the Iranian military on the Shatt Al-Arab, which heightened tensions between the UK, US, and Iran.[70] *300* accidentally fanned these flames with its depiction of Persian culture – including departures from Miller's text whereby some Persian soldiers were depicted as monstrous and deformed. The film was even banned in Iran, with Javad Shamaqdari, cultural advisor to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, claiming:

> American cultural officials thought they could get mental satisfaction by plundering Iran's historic past and insulting its civilisation. Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Hollywood and cultural authorities in the US initiated studies to figure out how to attack Iranian culture. …[*300*] is a product of such studies.[71]

Shamaqdari's reading of the film is overly literal and fails to take into account the sources and narrative structure of the film. As will be discussed in greater depth below, the portrayal of the Persians and their culture in *300* is a product of both comic book iconography as well as the creation of an unreliable narrator. Furthermore, Shamaqdari's reading of the film hinges on the Persians equating to contemporary Iranians. Some critics, however, read *300* as an analogy in which it is Xerxes and the Persian Empire that parallel Bush and America. Corliss explains such interpretations as suggesting Xerxes/Bush is a megalomaniac, who leads a large, all-powerful empire to attack a smaller country, occupy its territory and enslave its populace.[72] Furthermore, in Herodotus' account of the war Mardonius, an advisor to the king, persuades Xerxes to undertake the invasion in order to "enhance your reputation, and also make people think twice in the future before attacking your territory."[73] In the climate of post-9/11 retaliation against terrorism, Xerxes and Bush's reasons for war seem surprisingly similar. One could also evoke the discussion surrounding PNAC as further evidence of an imperialist, empire-building motive behind Bush's actions, similar to Xerxes. The Persians also speak with vaguely American accents in the film, compared to the British-accented Spartans, in a subversion of the linguistic paradigm commonly heard in ancient world epics. Finally, if one extends this analogy the Spartans would therefore equate to Iraqi insurgents or Fedayeen, and as the film encourages audience sympathy to side with the Spartans *300* could be understood as supporting American opposition in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With two radically different interpretations of *300* circulating, Snyder was occasionally asked how he intended the film to be read or if he supported a particular reading. Unlike Petersen and Stone in Chapter One, Snyder's limited body of work prior to *300* left critics little room to compare the politics or themes of the film with Snyder's previous projects. Nevertheless, his response echoes that of Petersen and Stone, noting that in the years he was working on the film: "the politics caught up with us. I've had people ask me if Xerxes or Leonidas is George W. Bush. I say, 'Great. Awesome. If it inspires you to think about the current geopolitical situation,

cool.'"[74] Unlike the other directors, however, this quote exemplifies Snyder's non-committal approach to interpreting *300*. Perhaps Snyder learnt from the commercial disappointments of *Alexander* and *Troy* and avoided promoting or denying any contemporary relevance to the film in favour of drawing attention to the film's comic book source, use of CGI, action, and stylised aesthetic.

While analogous readings of *300* are contradictory and inconclusive, and Snyder reticent to support a specific reading, the film can still be interpreted allegorically. Snyder's Spartans are willing to sacrifice themselves, as Dilios states: "for our homes, our families, our freedoms." The references to 'freedom' in both the novel and film are emphasised through repeated references to its antonym, 'slavery'. The Spartan fear of slavery is featured in Herodotus' account where Demaratus, an exiled Spartan King, informs Xerxes that:

> there's no way in which they [the Spartans] will ever listen to any proposals of yours which will bring slavery on Greece; second, they will certainly resist you, even if all the other Greeks come over to your side.[75]

The dialogue in *300* is often taken word for word from Miller's graphic novel, with only minor alterations and occasional additions, such as in Gorgo's subplot. In Miller's graphic novel, 'freedom' (or derivations, like 'free') is used eight times, with 'glory', 'reason', 'justice' and 'hope' similarly repeated, although less frequently. Only 'law' is used more, with eight references to Spartan 'law' and two as part of the title 'law-giver'. This usage is suggestive of the Spartan sense of duty, but could equally be a criticism of the council and the Ephor's adherence to the law which prohibits the Spartan army from marching to Thermopylae. In Snyder's film, however, there are nine uses of 'law' while the use of 'freedom' increases to thirteen. Although these two terms may seem contradictory, Cyrino has argued that because Spartans associate duty with honour: "*300* succeeds in having it both ways, by conflating the modern viewers' predilection for heroic autonomy with the historical fact of Spartan duty, deference, and devotion to community."[76] *300* renders its eponymous figures symbolic defenders of freedom, and in this way it becomes an allegory – like many other ancient world epics – for the smaller group fighting for freedom against an imperialist, totalitarian power. The symbolic nature of the story is reinforced by the film's simplification of history, avoiding the possibility of a specific 'anti-allegorical' depiction of the battle through over-complication.

In both *The 300 Spartans* and *300*, however, this allegorical element can be applied to the contemporary climate to become an allegory for world events. As above, *The 300 Spartans* was read as allegorical support for the US and its allies fighting against Soviet Russia. In *300*, the emphasis on freedom again associates the Spartans with contemporary America. The additional uses of 'freedom' in Snyder's film derive from its indigenous scenes featuring Gorgo, including one in which she informs a Spartan council member that "freedom isn't free at all … it comes with the highest of costs, the cost of blood." For American audiences the phrase "freedom isn't free" should resonate as a famous US military idiom which is engraved upon the Korean War Memorial in Washington, DC. Furthermore, 'freedom' was a particularly common inclusion within the post-9/11 speeches of President Bush. In his short address to the nation following the September 11th attacks he uses 'free'/'freedom' three times, including in the first line of the speech: "Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts."[77] This closely resembles Dilios' aforementioned list of: "our homes, our families, our freedoms." Similarly, 'free'/'freedom' is used four times in Bush's short speech announcing the invasion of Iraq, positioning America as defending its own freedom while also making Iraq 'free': "We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail. May God bless our country and all who defend her."[78]

Critics were quick to pick up on the repeated use of 'freedom' in *300*. Snyder recounts the reaction to the film's unveiling at the Berlin Film Festival, where:

> I was getting bombarded with political questions … When someone in a movie says, 'We're going to fight for freedom,' that's now a dirty word … Europeans totally feel that way. If you mention democracy or freedom, you're an imperialist or a fascist. That's crazy to me.[79]

These associations of fascism or imperialism may derive from some of the previously discussed associations between Sparta and Nazi Germany; associations that may not have been appreciated at the Berlin Film Festival. Such readings principally derive from *300*'s jingoistic attitude towards war and violence and a misunderstanding in the visual representations of historic cultures in the film, as will be discussed. This was aggravated by the various elements – including the use of 'freedom' – that encouraged reading the Spartans as analogous to the American military during a period of heightened tension in relation to the Iraq War.

However, the use of 'freedom' in the film is not specifically designed to appeal to US audiences. In simplifying history and placing the Spartans as the defenders of freedom, *300* centralises an ideological theme with wide-reaching appeal. While not every culture will understand 'freedom' in the same way, its ancient connotations of not being ruled or enslaved are at a basic level desirable. Recent historical epics including *Braveheart* (1995), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Gladiator* all feature freedom as a central reason the protagonists fight: and all were successful at the box office. As such, the fight for freedom has become a recurrent trope not only of the ancient world epic but of many historical epics both pre- and post-9/11. As Cyrino has concluded:

> Spurred on by financial incentives and creative aspirations to express a more enlightened, global outlook, contemporary historical epics … seek to reach the widest possible international audiences. So contemporary filmmakers are now crafting their narrative strategies to engage with and promote broad cross-cultural and even universal structures of identification, affinity, and inclusivity.[80]

Indeed, McCrisken and Pepper likewise state in a discussion of freedom in 1990s historical and sci-fi films that:

> Exactly what this freedom constitutes is never explicitly explained, though this tendency towards abstraction is probably not coincidental because it allows us to read it either as a universal right in itself or as a universal right conceived in the image of an imagined America."[81]

Likewise, in his review of *King Arthur*, Sean Macauly describes 'freedom' as "the one value that works for all modern audiences".[82] Burgoyne, though, differentiates *300* from some of its predecessors, such as *Spartacus*, *Gladiator*, and *Braveheart*, in that in their scenarios: "freedom is something to be realized in the future, a utopian fulfilment or anticipation of the days that change the world. In *300*, however, the Spartan order is defined as the already-existing exemplar of freedom in the ancient world."[83] Although his statement is specific to *300*, Burgoyne has identified a recurrent trope of post-9/11 ancient world epics, in that 'freedom' in these films – as with America – becomes an object of defence rather than an object of desire. Although the term was rarely used, the Trojans in *Troy* fought to maintain their freedom from the attacking Greek army. In *Alexander*, while the meaning is vague, the eponymous conqueror roused his men on the battlefield of Gaugamela by invoking "the freedom and the glory of Greece." In *King Arthur* the ancient Britons fight for freedom from Rome, while Arthur and his knights eventually lead them in the

defence of Hadrian's Wall from another foreign invader with Arthur reminding them in his pre-battle speech: "the gift of freedom is yours by right…let history remember that as free men we chose to make it so." In the aftermath of the attacks on America on September 11th 2001, these films' use of 'freedom' appears to show a shift in focus, whereby freedom is now a right to be defended more often than it is a desire to be obtained.

Analogous readings of *300* are available and supported by various scenes which could be regarded as alluding to contemporary events and features of the War on Terror, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, these readings are at times contradictory or incomplete, and none are supported by the filmmakers suggesting they were intentional allusions. The film appears to contain an allegorical message about the defence of freedom from tyranny, and while this can be applied to post-9/11 America, the fight for freedom has long been a trope of the ancient world and historical epic film. Its return to prominence appears to be driven by economic incentives as much as a reflection of US self-promotion and foreign policy.

THE COMBAT FILM While *300* shares certain features, such as the defence of freedom, with *Troy* and *Alexander*, it owes a greater debt to its Roman predecessor, *Gladiator*. Snyder's depiction of the Spartans reveals a partial Romanisation of Greek history. The characterisation of Leonidas reiterates the similarities between Maximus and Hector described in the previous chapter, in that all three are dark-haired, bearded, possess a wife and son, are drawn into conflict and ultimately killed defending those they love. In dialogue native to Snyder's film, Leonidas even rephrases Maximus' "What we do in life echoes in eternity" in his pre-battle exaltation "Remember this day men, for it will be yours for all time." In another of Snyder's additions, Leonidas bids farewell to Gorgo and their son in a wheat field, in what appears to be an allusion to *Gladiator*'s scenes of Elysium/Maximus' farm, in which the character walks through a wheat field to be reunited with his wife and son. The non-diegetic music accompanying these scenes is similar, both utilising a lone, melancholy female voice. Furthermore, the physical appearance of Gorgo recalls that of *Gladiator*'s Lucilla, and both characters are protective of their young sons. Indeed, the expanded Gorgo narrative in *300* appears heavily inspired by that of

Lucilla, as both women attempt secret dealings with elder statesmen to organise support for the men they love, but face sexual threats from adversaries (Theron and Commodus, respectively). Finally, as Nisbet has also noted, the Spartan council closely resembles many cinematic portrayals of the Roman senate, the crimson cloaks worn by the Spartans recall the conventional appearance of Roman soldiers (including those at the beginning of *Gladiator*), and emphasis on Sparta as a militaristic society removes standard Greek associations with philosophy and intellectualism by favouring the Roman brutality of *Gladiator*.[84]

Fig.2.4: Gorgo enters the Spartan council chamber in *300*

However, *300* owes a less obvious – but arguably greater – generic debt to the combat film in its depiction of the Spartans. Lynn Fotheringham regards Miller's Spartans as being heavily influenced by training sequences in combat films.[85] To illustrate this, she cites Miller's image of the men doing impossible press-ups while their comrades stand on their backs as evocative of the training sequences in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Furthermore, the Spartan "Hoo-ah" chant is reminiscent of that used by the US Marines, although conversely Jeffrey Richards adds it to his list of fascist motifs in *300,* stating it "is delivered as if it were *Sieg Heil*."[86] However, those familiar with combat films will easily recognise the call as that used by Rangers and Marines, and Snyder confirms that this was his intention when discussing the chant

in his commentary on the DVD.[87] Furthermore, the life and training of US Rangers bears similarities to that of *300*'s Spartans. Mark Bowden, author of *Black Hawk Down*, describes the US Rangers in his book as they are about to enter Mogadishu:

> The weak had been weeded out. The strong had stepped up. Then came weeks, months, years of constant training. The *Hoo-ahs* couldn't wait to go to war. They were an all-star football team that had endured bruising, exhausting, dangerous practice sessions twelve hours a day, seven days a week – for *years* – without ever getting to play the game.[88]

The jingoistic attitude of the Spartans is a heightened representation of their militaristic culture but also evokes modern American military-sports culture. According to Lynda Boose, a common trait of American schooling is the promotion of competition and rewarding physical achievement in sports; a mentality which has also pervaded the US military.[89] Discussing media coverage of the First Gulf War, she describes how pilots returning from bombing missions referred to their successes in sporting terms, such as 'a home run' or a 'touchdown'. While discussing *Gladiator* and violence in the Roman/American arena, Cyrino has drawn similar connections between sports and the US military:

> Similarly, the modern American sports arena has always been a privileged location for the display of patriotism … But there has been a notable increase in the martial tenor of these presentations in the pre-game and half-time showcases of professional and collegiate sporting events, with more military marching bands and deafening F-16 flyovers, as if to exorcise fears of unseen enemies while flexing American military muscle.[90]

In *300* a similar attitude can be seen in the Spartan's gung-ho persona and in their team-talk catchphrases, such as "Give them nothing, but take from them everything" and "This is where we fight, this is where they die." Even the episodic nature of the battle in *300* appears to resemble a game, where the combatants take a 'time out' before heading in to the next level, round, or quarter. In short: despite their death, the Spartans behave like winners.

It is partially in this respect that I believe the film resonated with American audiences. *300* arrived amidst a string of combat films such as *Redacted* (2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), and *Battle for Haditha* (2007), which were critical of American activity in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the War on Terror. The revelations surrounding the maltreatment of prisoners had come and gone, and President Bush was ordering more men into Iraq to combat the growing violence. Following the initial invasion in which the speed and skill of the US military had achieved a short victory, the US forces had become bogged down in cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi, and Sadr City. American casualties

were escalating due to the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and guerrilla warfare within urban environments. As a result of this new type of warfare, the war films of that period rarely showed extended scenes of combat. Instead, they portrayed Americans committing reprehensible acts of violence or sadism, or else as victims of IEDs, a hostile environment, or returning to America where they suffer from PTSD or injury. Combat-centric films such as those of the late 1990s-early 2000s were few in number. Furthermore, the tropes of the 1980s Vietnam War combat film, including the abandoned soldier-son, were exhumed and even influenced ancient world epics' depictions of combat, as seen in *Alexander*.

By contrast, *300*'s depiction of warfare was radically out of sync with the prevailing trend of the combat film cycle during this period. While the Iraq War films in particular resembled the Vietnam War films of the 1980s, *300* more closely resembled *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). The latter film sees John Rambo, the psychologically scarred veteran of *First Blood* (1982), refight the Vietnam War in an action packed fantasy. Returning to the jungles of Vietnam he finds and frees US POWs and even utilises the Vietcong's tactics against them. For Tony Williams, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* is a comic book treatment of Vietnam, "bringing everything down to uncomplicated meaning."[91]

However, Studlar and Desser have presented a psychoanalytical reading of the film in which they argue it is a reaction to the sense of national guilt caused by America's Vietnam War experience. They reason that if individuals can feel guilt and attempt to repress it – as we see in the majority of protagonists in Iraq War films – a culture can too.[92] They identify a dual process with which to repress guilt: the first is displacement, whereby guilt is transposed onto the victimised soldier or veteran; the second is to rewrite history through mythologizing events.[93] In the case of *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, this sees the Vietnam veteran take the form of a strong, muscular hero who returns to the country, saves American lives, and takes revenge on both the Vietnamese and the governmental institutions who betrayed and abandoned him during the war. Indeed, Rambo recalls the aforementioned trope of the abandoned soldier-son, but with the aid of the father-figure, Colonel Trauptman, he becomes a moral, almost mythic figure. Rambo's violence is a cathartic experience, as Studlar and Desser explain:

> As a reaction formation against feelings of powerlessness too painful to be admitted or articulated, Rambo's violent reprisals, dependent on the power of the over-fetishized male body, may be read as a symptomatic expression, a psychosomatic signifier of the return of the repressed.[94]

Studlar and Desser's statement recalls the argument made in my Introduction that national trauma is too broad a generalisation, as not everyone will feel or experience an event in the same way. However, the success of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* suggests that it did at least resonate with a particular part of the US population.

Essentially, this same process occurred in Herodotus' and subsequent authors' retelling of Thermopylae, where the Greek defeat was displaced onto the heroic final stand of the Spartans and their allies. *300*, similar to *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, arrived among a series of critical Iraq and Afghanistan War films in which the victimised US soldier was a recurrent motif. Unlike the fighting in Iraq, however, *300* sees two easily defined armies meet on a clearly designated battlefield, wherein the Americanised Spartans exemplify their martial prowess, have a clearly defined objective, and fight to defend the freedom of Greece. Although their father-figures (the Ephors and Spartan Council) attempt to abandon them, Leonidas maintains order and discipline, acting as a father figure to his men and even calling them "children". Like Rambo, the Spartans are muscular, strong, physically idealised figures that never become victims of PTSD or show weakness, and through Dilios' narrative their sacrifice is lauded and depicted as integral to the final victory.

Rambo: First Blood Part II can be interpreted as a 'wish-fulfillment' fantasy, in which a symbol of US militarism effectively 'wins' the Vietnam War and Cold War by single-handedly defeating a combined Vietnamese and Russian army. *300* could similarly be interpreted by viewers as a wish-fulfilment fantasy for the US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, as its depiction of a Western army at war with an Eastern power circumvents the Vietnam-era tropes that dominated Iraq and Afghanistan War films at this time. As noted above, *300* appeared to appeal particularly to those who supported the Republican-led American action in Iraq, Afghanistan and the War on Terror. Studlar and Desser similarly note that *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was especially popular among right-wing conservative audiences.[95] As such, one could theorise that there is a politicised element to *300* and its success. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, prior to *300*'s release the most commercially successful ancient world epic of this cycle (and to date, still the most successful) was 2004's

The Passion of the Christ. The film courted the right wing Christian audiences in America who proved to be a lucrative market. Although we can only hypothesise, it is possible that against a backdrop of critical, left-wing Iraq and Afghanistan War films, *300*'s right-wing, combat-heavy fantasy adventure resonated with US audiences, especially those on the right, regardless of whether the filmmakers intended it to be embraced that way.

The protracted production process of *300* meant the filmmakers could not predict how the combat film would evolve after 9/11 or how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would progress over the intervening years leading up to its release. By chance, the film capitalised on a zeitgeist moment, arriving as it did during the renewed surge in Iraq. *300* presents a largely idealised depiction of the Spartans who embody US martial superiority against an Eastern army, fight for a moral cause with clear objectives, and offer viewers an escape from the portentous misery and complex realities of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. The historical setting was sufficient to visually differentiate the action on screen from contemporary conflicts and politics. The basic allegorical framework of 'freedom versus tyranny' could be paralleled to contemporary events concerning US involvement in the Middle East, but this could equally be done in relation to other cultures, battles and events in history – just as the historical Thermopylae has been a parallel for other 'final stand' narratives for centuries. As Snyder has said of the film:

> With *300*, the why is obvious…and that's a thing that maybe doesn't even exist in real life. Maybe when it happened it wasn't even that clear. That's why it's a piece of mythology. It's what we would hope for.[96]

300's mythologised depiction of combat, with characters inspired by an idealised concept of the US military, was seemingly received and interpreted by US audiences in a similar manner to *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, although Snyder does not appear to have intended such parallels to have been drawn. Nevertheless, in adopting elements of the redemptive, action-orientated spectacle of *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, *300* married the combat film, comic book movie and ancient world epic through appeals to the core similarities between mythology and comic book iconography.

BODY POLITICS AND COMIC BOOKS *300*'s relationship to the ancient world epic is evident, and as has been shown aspects of the combat film are layered into its depiction of ancient warfare in a manner similar to *Alexander* and *Troy*, although to a different end. However, while those former Greek epics maintain the semantics of the ancient world epic while subtly working in allusions to twentieth century conflicts as well as syntactic elements of the combat film, *300*'s genre hybridisation with the comic book film is more overt. Thus far in this chapter I have primarily discussed how aspects of *300* have been interpreted, but in this section I will explain why the film has garnered these readings. More specifically, I will show how the film has hybridised the ancient world epic with the comic film and what influence this has on how the film can be interpreted.

The past two decades have seen the comic book movie rise to stratospheric heights as commercially successful ventures, despite the source materials commonly being associated with a niche audience. In an article for the *New York Times*, Neal Stephenson describes how "geeks can make lots of money now," adding that "the growing popularity of science fiction, the rise of graphic novels, anime and video games…have given creators and fans of this kind of art a confidence…[that] is kind of cool now."[97] Prior to *300*'s release, the Miller-influenced comic book movies *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Sin City* (2005) had proved commercially successful. The latter, a close adaptation of Miller's work, employed similar digital visuals to *300* and was referenced on various posters for Snyder's film to appeal to like-minded audiences. Indeed, Warner targeted this area of the market closely, organising a Q&A with Snyder and Miller at San Diego's Comic Con in July 2006. As Pamela McClintock in *Variety* predicted, the marketing of *300* was relying on its striking computer generated visuals and origins as a graphic novel rather than its status as an ancient world epic.[98] The buzz surrounding the early footage screened at San Diego Comic Con became a talking point within comic book communities online and helped generate hype for the film long before its release: Snyder even thanks the online community for their support of the film and in making it a success in a video message included on the DVD release.[99]

Fig.2.5: Ephialtes in *300*

Foremost among the influences Snyder's film draws from Miller's graphic novel is its imagery, including framing, shot composition, and visual design. Snyder brings the stylised character designs and action of the comic directly to the screen, but as Derek Parker Royal explains: "unlike film, where characters have time to develop, graphic narrative, with its relatively limited temporal space, must condense identity along commonly accepted paradigms."[100] This involves the use of stereotyped characters and physical evocations of personality, or as Miller states: "In cartooning you make someone's physicality a metaphor for their interior reality."[101]

A prime example of this is Ephialtes, the figure who reveals the pathway around the Greek defensive line to the Persians. Miller, and subsequently Snyder, deviates from the historical record with the character's identity: no longer a shepherd, Ephialtes is refigured (and disfigured) into a Spartan who was born deformed but saved from abandonment and death by his mother. Miller has said that this representation of Ephialtes was designed to emphasise the cruelty of Spartan culture, but despite their rejection of him at birth Ephialtes still desires to join his countrymen at Thermopylae.[102] Leonidas is forced to refuse him a place in their ranks due to his inability to contribute equally to the locked-shield fighting formation known as the 'phalanx'. Heart-broken, Ephialtes betrays the Spartans by revealing the mountain

path to Xerxes in return for a uniform; such is his desire to feel included in a social structure. At the film's climax, Leonidas tells Ephialtes, who is now dressed as a Persian, that he hopes he lives forever. In so doing, he acknowledges that Ephialtes will never have the 'glorious death' the Spartans crave; in short, he will never be like them.[103] As Miller states, the character's physical deformities acknowledge the cruel side of Spartan culture. However, in the conventions of comic book visuals his appearance also hints at his treacherous nature, while historian Bettany Hughes proposes that Ephialtes' deformities are symbolic of how the historical figure has been demonised throughout history because of his actions.[104]

Indeed, *300*'s aesthetic must be viewed as symbolic. For instance, the Spartan's baring of flesh emphasises their humanity, while the phalanx represents their unity and social cohesion. As discussed, they are an idealised form of masculinity and athleticism, and their physical perfection embodies their ideological supremacy over the Persians. The latter are depicted as a faceless hoard: their flesh and features are largely concealed under clothes and armour, and they are adorned with chains and piercings which are emblematic of their status as slaves. Those that do reveal flesh are often deformed and mutated, and few – if any – are developed as characters or embody individuality. The monstrous Persians of Snyder's film do not appear in Miller's novel, but they continue the same conventions of symbolic physical representation. For example, the amputee concubines and burn victims that Xerxes offers to Ephialtes in return for his support show his acceptance within Persian society regardless of his physical shape or appearance: in many ways Persian society is far more accepting than the elitist Spartans. Similarly, Snyder's film features the giant Uber-Immortal, a towering, semi-nude, grey-skinned monster defeated by Leonidas during the first night's fighting. In his appearance he becomes a walking metaphor for Leonidas' fears of slavery: his muscular form evokes that of the Spartan king, but it is contorted and freakishly exaggerated. The Uber-Immortal cannot speak, and he is dragged to the battlefield in chains rather than of his own free will. Of the Persians, Xerxes is the only one to reflect the physical muscularity of the Spartans, but his body is covered in gold jewellery and he is of immense height, symbolising his wealth, greed, and supposed divinity.

Some have read this visual dichotomy between the Eastern and Western armies allegorically, as David C. Ryan explains:

> *300*'s allegorical universe is simple, even oversimplified. Snyder celebrates certain western values and condemns eastern hegemony because he wants his audience to understand what is at stake – the fate of western civilization. His sympathies are clear because the Spartans, even with their overdetermined masculinity, look more human and act more human than their serpentine enemies.[105]

300's depiction of Spartan and Persian cultures has been repeatedly misinterpreted by reviews, and this misinterpretation has informed the basis of many analogous and allegorical readings of the film as a reflection of Western supremacy over the Middle East. This included the aforementioned statement by Javad Shamaqdari that the film was US propaganda which led to *300* being banned in Iran. When confronted with this event, Snyder commented that the Iranian response:

> surprised me a bit because I would hope that people understood that the last thing I'd want is to offend anyone with the film. If anyone is offended by it, I'm deeply sorry because that's not the intention of the movie at all. To me, it's a work of fantasy; it's not intended to depict any culture in a realistic way. That's just not what the movie is . . . I made it because I wanted to reinvigorate cinema. It takes a lot to get people out to the cinema nowadays.[106]

Rodrigo Santoro, who plays Xerxes, supported Snyder's line, stating: "I think the message is up to you. It's up to the viewer. We're just trying to reproduce the graphic novel and make a piece of entertainment."[107] While in almost all other respects Snyder's film was faithful to Miller's text, the decision to portray the Persians as not just a faceless mass but as specifically monstrous in some scenes is questionable and potentially insensitive.

Fig.2.6: Persian Immortal with mask removed in *300*

A prime example of *300*'s apparent insensitivity would be its depiction of the Persian Immortals. Historically, these figures were the elite soldiers of the Persian army. Their title derived from the notion that they could not be killed, as their number remained ten thousand strong however many perished in battle. In reality, when an Immortal was killed another soldier would simply take his place to continue the illusion.[108] While Miller's visuals depicted them in a manner similar to samurai or ninjas, Snyder expands the portrayal of the Immortals to make them truly monstrous: in the 'tree of the dead' sequence described above the Spartans discover an Immortal's footprint which suggests they have clawed feet. When they eventually arrive at Thermopylae to engage the Spartans, Snyder's sequence of introductory shots follows the comic's panels closely until it cuts to an additional close-up shot to reveal the deformed, clawed hand of the lead Immortal. During the battle, Dilios knocks off an Immortal's mask to reveal an orc-like grotesque underneath. To reduce the military elite of one of the largest nations in antiquity to such an appearance could understandably be seen as offensive. In its stylised form, it evokes American propaganda during WWII which depicted the Japanese as monstrous or as cartoonish stereotypes. As Parker Royal explains:

> narrating through stereotypes takes on critical resonance when filtered through an ideological prism. Authors may expose, either overtly or through tacit implication, certain recognized or

> even unconscious prejudices held by them and/or their readers. In comics and graphic art there is always the all-too-real danger of negative stereotype and caricature, which strips others of any unique identity and dehumanizes by means of reductive iconography.[109]

300's defamatory depiction of Eastern culture as home to several inhuman entities was poorly timed and appeared painfully insensitive. Snyder has even recounted that the producers feared inciting controversy over the film's portrayal of the Persians, remarking that: "There was a huge sensitivity about East versus West with the studio…They said, 'Is there any way we could not call (the bad guys) Persians? Would it be cool if we called them Zoroastrians?"[110] American understanding of the Middle East has at times proved insubstantial; something John Keegan has cited as a cause for many of the mistakes made by the US government and military in Iraq.[111] However, in his analysis of YouTube videos which appropriate clips from *300*, Gideon Nisbet has noted that those focusing on the Spartans are often humorous in nature and do not consider their representation in the film as being historically authentic.[112] However, those which focus on the Persian characters are not humorous, and mistakenly interpret the film as intending to be historical rather than stylised and symbolic, and condemn it as anti-Iranian propaganda. This suggests offense has indeed been caused, but to some viewers who have misread the film's tone and intentions. As Xavier states in discussing allegory:

> They symptomatically project the reader's own predicaments onto the person or group under observation (whether a class, an ethnic group, a gender, or an entire nation). Here the reader and his or her cultural bias – that is to say, the pole of interpretation – become the major instance responsible for the allegory."[113]

What some American audiences may therefore regard as a comic book narrative with symbolic imagery, an Iranian viewer could regard as an insulting condemnation of their country's history. Nevertheless, the majority of views expressed by academics, critics and political figures discussed thus far have failed to fully acknowledge the influence the film's narrative structure – and specifically the role of the narrator – has on our interpretation of the work.

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR As we saw in the last chapter, the role of the unreliable narrator is a significant trope of this current cycle of epics, and *300* is no different. The film develops the role of Dilios, a Spartan soldier with a gift for storytelling who fights at Thermopylae and loses an eye in the battle. On the eve of the final day,

Leonidas sends him back to Sparta to memorialise their sacrifice through his stories, and also to give a message to Gorgo from her husband.[114] Whereas Miller's novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator with occasional digressions for Dilios' stories, the main narrative of Snyder's film takes place through an extended series of flashbacks narrated by Dilios as he recounts the life and death of Leonidas to the Spartan army on the eve of Plataea. The decision to make Dilios the sole narrator of the film is the greatest difference between Snyder's and Miller's versions of *300*, and has immense ramifications for how we interpret the material.

David C. Ryan has discussed Dilios' narration from a classical, literary perspective, arguing that *300* is in keeping with an ancient poetic tradition. He states that:

> this poetic tale – even with the embellishments – is what is called an epideictic portrait, one in which an audience learns of the virtues of a person and his life…In this heroic narrative, Dilios employs a range of tropes (particularly metonymy) to simplify yet illustrate the political, cultural, and moral contrasts between the west and the east.[115]

The events and the imagery we see in *300* are not historical events as interpreted by Miller or Snyder, but by Dilios. While we, as the non-diegetic audience, listen, learn and observe the battle of Thermopylae through his narration, within the diegetic world of the film the story is being directed at the Spartan soldiers on the eve of Plataea. Ryan also notes that it was a Spartan custom prior to battle for soldiers to tell tales of past victories and heroic acts to inspire troops to fight harder and perform bravely the next day.[116] Indeed, as mentioned in the Introduction, a similar custom is described by US Navy SEAL Chris Kyle when he and the other soldiers were given a screening of *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *We Were Soldiers* (2002) and *Braveheart* to get them in the right frame of mind for training.[117] Dilios' narration is designed to be impactful and persuasive, and his account will likewise be open to his own interpretation, corruption and imagination. Details and descriptions will therefore be selected, structured and shaped to raise the morale of his fellow Spartans and prepare them for combat. To do this he systematically dehumanises the Persians. Hughes argues that the demonization of the Immortals works within the context of Dilios' narration as it reflects how the Spartans would have imagined them after hearing the tales of their immortality and witnessing the aftermath of the village massacre.[118] The film's addition of the clawed footprint in the mud is one of Dilios' inventions to build anticipation for his diegetic audience before they encounter the Immortals later, and in so doing it has the same effect for the non-diegetic audience.

During the battle against the Immortals, it is Dilios who knocks off the Immortal's mask and reveals the monstrous visage beneath. Furthermore, the array of deformed bodies used to entice Ephialtes in Xerxes' camp, including a goat-headed man, and the Persian executioner with fin-like blades grown from his arms in place of hands, are all scenes Dilios did not witness yet is describing to his audience. By removing the Persians' humanity and actively making them monstrous, he is encouraging his Spartan comrades at Plataea to distance themselves from the act of killing another human. Equally, the idealisation of the three-hundred, their bravery, and perhaps even Leonidas' dying act of wounding Xerxes, could all be fictions invented by Dilios to inspire his countrymen. As Ryan summarises, "in this soldier's tale, the world is dichotomized between heroes and monsters . . . like most allegories, both the heroes and enemies are idealized and caricatured."[119]

In utilising this technique Snyder successfully incorporates the stylised imagery of the graphic novel into the ancient world epic by accounting for it as the creation of the unreliable narrator. The fantastical, monstrous additions of Snyder's film to Miller's version of the story are the product of Dilios' aims of dehumanising the Persians and inspiring the Spartans on the eve of battle. Dilios' narration encapsulates the 'Spartan mirage', and reveals the process of how history is transformed into myth. As Crabtree explains:

> Miller has said it's not that Snyder faithfully copied every last detail in his novel, it's that he tapped into a similar mythic scope. Snyder nailed the visual ideal of an oral history told over hundreds of years by firelight.[120]

Fig.2.7: Dilios tells a story on the eve of Plataea in *300*

Snyder's use of the device is similar to that of Stone's, in that both films reflect how history is shaped, recorded, and events memorialised by their tellers. As such, it becomes evident that the film is not being presented to the viewer as historical fact, an accurate representation of either Sparta or Persia, nor is it even being presented as reality. Snyder places us near the Spartan campfire to hear Dilios create a mythology; a form of storytelling synonymous with allegory, and Dilios' tale reiterates the aggrandisement of those who fight for freedom in the face of tyranny. However, while Snyder's depiction of the Spartans alludes to US culture, specifically that of the military, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the film was intended as an analogy for America's role in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the War on Terror. Its time of release proved fortuitous, however, and its content resonated with a section of the US and world audiences for a number of reasons: its message, its visual spectacle, and its liminal status as a comic book movie, combat film, and ancient world epic. Its commercial success would inspire replication, though, in a series of films which similarly foreground digital effects and mythological narratives.

GODS AND MONSTERS In reviewing *300*, Mark Kermode dismissed analogous and allegorical interpretations of the film and instead focussed on its aesthetic and

fascination with the male form, concluding: “it has nothing going on between its ears, but it has much going on between its abs.”[121] While this could be considered a flippant comment, Kermode has actually revealed a recurrent element of *300*’s self-presentation. The marketing of the film from posters, interviews, and webisodes (online production diaries) to the special features on the DVD repeatedly emphasise the visual design of the film rather than promoting a particular political or allegorical message. In so doing, one could argue that *300*’s makers intended to draw audience attention to its stylisation and a veneer of visual trickery in order to avoid politicised readings and maintain an audience-friendly ambiguity in terms of its message. This recalls references to *The Robe* (1953) in the Introduction, whereby the film’s use of CinemaScope drew greater press attention upon its release than analogous and allegorical readings of the film, which it garnered later.

300 was also pioneering a relatively new form of visual design in its use of blue-screen technology, although it was similar to that used in *Sin City*. Snyder’s employment of this device also helped circumvent the issue of how to realise ancient Greece’s *mise-en-scène*, which it achieved through creating backgrounds that were often relatively simple in design: rock formations, the sea, sky, wheat fields, and simple columned buildings. As they appear in the film, they are often created as if shot using a shallow depth of field. This draws further attention to the various bodies on display in the foreground, as well as the violence inflicted upon them. Amputations and penetrations abound in the combat sequences, which show copious amounts of CG blood scanned and replicated from the pages of Miller’s graphic novel and used yet further in the movie’s poster campaign. *300* renders combat strangely beautiful, utilising slow motion to reveal the shapes, forms and motion that rapid cutting and standard speed rarely reveal. Snyder cited Sam Peckinpah as a major influence in his combination of slow-motion and violence, but the visuals are also directly influenced by the source novel.[122] Slowing down the action to almost a freeze-frame, Snyder replicates the static imagery of Miller’s source in a series of carefully choreographed poses which allude directly to panels from the novel – what Dru Jeffries calls “compositional quotation” or “panel moments”.[123] Furthermore, by creating his scenery digitally, Snyder is able to render unnatural and stylised vistas from the novel faithfully in the film. Fans of the graphic

novel will recognise these moments, creating an interaction between filmmaker and informed viewer such as that described by Noël Carroll in the Introduction.[124]

300's use of slow motion and CG violence can also be regarded as a visual illustration of the Spartan mind in combat; they respond to the violence around them with a sense of calm and clarity that their allies and adversaries cannot replicate. This contrasts to other filmic depictions of combat, such as those in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Gladiator* which frequently use rapid editing and handheld cameras to create a sense of freneticism and panic. Furthermore, *300*'s stylisation of violence subverts a norm of the combat film in which slow motion sequences are used to emphasise the horrors of warfare. As Hughes-Warrington has suggested, in these sequences time is slowed: "to protect ourselves from the embodied senses of fear, pain, or disgust that result from interactions with phenomena" – including war.[125] In *300*, however, the sequences appear to reflect the martial superiority of the Spartans. Indeed, the device even works in harmony with the film's depiction of the Spartans as evocative of US military/sports culture, as the sequences resemble slow-motion replays of sporting action to celebrate the skill on show.

However, in this reliance on digitally-created *mise-en-scène* and wartime violence, Nisbet argues: "the film's plug-and-play antiquity is not a historical setting in a traditional epic-movie sense … instead it is a gameplay environment."[126] Kenneth Turan similarly remarks that: "Once the newness of *300*'s look wears off, which it inevitably does, what we are left with is a videogame come to life."[127] Comparisons of *300*'s digital design to videogame imagery are indicative of the film's targeting of adolescent and early-twenties audiences who enjoy videogames and comic books. Likewise, Blanshard and Shahabudin have referred to the work of Dunstan Lowe, who believes the growth of ancient world epics is symbiotic with a growth of videogames set in antiquity.[128] In identifying and utilising this particular market, *300*'s commercial success initiated a point of departure for a series of subsequent films which, while still ancient world epics, would similarly utilise CGI to create mythological imagery.

Unlike *300*, however, these films would garner little media attention as analogous or allegorical texts. On the surface, this is surprising as myths are malleable constructs which regularly contain moral, religious, and political meaning to suit a given society,

as Derek Elley suggests.[129] This is particularly true of the ancient Greeks, as the city states would utilise myths to create historical precedents, such as connecting people or events to past heroes to establish a shared heritage and identity. For example, in the sixth century BC, the Pisistratid regime in Athens championed Heracles in their art and iconography, but once removed from power by the subsequent democracy the city saw a sudden growth in iconography and references to Theseus, whose actions were seen as mirroring the new democracy of Cleisthenes.[130] Considering the analogous and allegorical readings of *Troy*, *Alexander* and *300*, one could therefore approach *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Wrath of the Titans* (2012) and *Immortals* (2011) expecting to find an allegorical message contained therein.

In the genre's history, however, mythic films have rarely been subject to analogous readings beyond those already mentioned in relation to the *pepla*.[131] Instead, Greek mythology has more commonly been associated with spectacle and escapist entertainment, especially in the form of physically imposing heroes and mythical creatures.[132] In the case of the latter, perhaps the two most iconic works for Western audiences were those by stop-motion effects icon Ray Harryhausen: *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (1981). The filmmakers utilised locations and studio facilities common to the *pepla*, although Harryhausen desperately wanted to distance his films from the low production values and muscleman heroes of his Italian counterparts.[133] Nevertheless, some reviewers classed his work alongside these films, and in the case of *Jason and the Argonauts* the film suffered at the US box office because of the *pepla*'s declining popularity in the mid-1960s.[134] Harryhausen returned to Greek mythology with *Clash of the Titans*, which arrived as part of a cycle of escapist fantasy films rather than a revival of the ancient world epic – although the cycle did see another Hercules film in 1983, starring bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno. In each case, mythological films primarily appeared to be vehicles for fantastical spectacle rather than comments on the period in which they were made.

This is also true of Louis Leterrier's 2010 remake of *Clash of the Titans*. While the structure is different, almost all the action sequences of Harryhausen's film are present in some form but his stop-motion effects have now been replaced by CGI. The film adds one notable addition to the 1981 roster of fantastical creatures in the form of the Djinn; giant wooden nomads who live in the desert and appear vaguely

Arabic in their dress. Their leader, Sheikh Sulieman, heals Perseus and exhibits control over the giant scorpions that threaten the company. He eventually accompanies Perseus into Medusa's lair where he self-destructs in a manner that uncomfortably recalls a suicide bomber. The reasons for including the Djinn are truly baffling: they serve no specific purpose, have no characterisation, and there is nothing in the historical versions of the Perseus myth that references them. If they are intended as an allusion to contemporary events – namely in Sulieman's sacrifice – the intended meaning is unclear. Ultimately, though, the Djinn are a minor addition compared to the iconic creatures drawn from Harryhausen's film, including the giant scorpions, Medusa, Calibos, and the Kraken.

The film also owes a significant debt to *300*. Similar to Snyder's film, Blanshard and Shahabudin have regarded *Clash of the Titans* as possessing a "videogame aesthetic, with its dense backgrounds, simple character motivations and accented metallic sound design."[135] The film also features an electric-guitar-driven soundtrack, use of slow-motion during combat scenes, and in some scenes blue-/green-screen technology was used to create backdrops. As the narrative primarily involves the quest to claim Medusa's head, the *mise-en-scène* largely consists of landscapes rather than urban sites and Greek architecture, with the exception of Argos, and the action-driven plot similarly avoids the typical pitfalls of Greece being 'intellectual'. Finally, the film was scheduled for a March release, which Leterrier notes the studio referred to as "The *300* Date".[136] However, *Clash of the Titans* also arrived in the wake of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), which led its distributors to rush a 'retro-fitted' 3D conversion onto the film. Similar to *The Robe* and CinemaScope, this new novelty became a recurrent feature in reviews of the film ahead of suggestions of hidden meaning in the text.

Much the same is true for the film's sequel, *Wrath of the Titans*, directed by Jonathan Liebesman, as well as Tarsem Singh's *Immortals*. In their fantastical narratives, focus on the male body, use of CGI and blue-/green-screen, soundtrack, and slow motion, they deviate little from the model created by *300*. This is most clearly evident in *Immortals*, which was promoted on posters and DVD covers as "From the Producers of *300*" – despite Singh's hopes that his film would not be seen as a "comic strip movie."[137] Much of the film appears to have been shot on blue-/green-

screen, and its action sequences frequently replicate the shot composition and camera movements of *300*, namely parallel tracking shots in medium or medium-long shot watching the action in profile. In the similarities between these films and *300*, we see the reiteration of Altman and Blanshard and Shahabudin's argument that a successful film will inspire repetition in subsequent works in the genre cycle. However, unlike *300*, these films' positioned the central conflict of their narratives to be between mortals, immortals and monsters. In so doing, the films avoided the East versus West scenario which inspired the majority of analogous and allegorical readings of Snyder's film.

In many ways, these films evidence Daniel Herbert's concept of 'anti-allegory'. To reiterate:

> To be anti-allegorical, then, is to seek a very close proximity between representation and a single meaning. In interpretive practice, it is to short-circuit interpretations of a text's possible secondary meanings, generally through the eradication of latent content.[138]

These films direct viewer attention almost solely to their confluence of CG spectacle and fantastical imagery in portraying men at war with gods. In the case of Leterrier's *Clash of the Titans*, this is its main narrative alteration to the 1981 version. In the original, Perseus' heroism derives from his decision to undertake the quest for Medusa's head in order to save Andromeda, whom he loves. However, Leterrier doubted that this would be strong enough motivation for someone to go through such an ordeal, so in his remake Perseus' mission – like Maximus in *Gladiator* – is one of revenge.[139] In Leterrier's film, Perseus is raised by mortal parents, who are then killed by Hades, lord of the Underworld, as he attacks soldiers destroying a statue of Zeus. The gods (in this narrative) require human prayer and worship to accrue power and life, but the citizens of Argos are withholding their prayers and destroying the iconography of the gods out of protest for the way in which they are treated. This angers Zeus, who consents to Hades threatening to destroy Argos unless they begin to worship the gods again. Hades promises to do this by unleashing a sea-monster, the Kraken, unless Argos' king offers his daughter as sacrifice. Seeking vengeance for his parents' death, Perseus volunteers to retrieve the head of the Gorgon Medusa, the only weapon that can destroy the Kraken. During his quest he discovers he is the son of Zeus, but rejects divine assistance to complete his task as a mortal – albeit one with a magic sword and a flying horse. This he does: killing the Kraken,

defeating Hades, and in so doing he earns his father's respect. Furthermore, this personal, familial connection between the hero and his quest recurs in *Wrath of the Titans*. Ares imprisons his father, Zeus, in Tartarus and drains him of his power in order to free the titan Kronos: the father of Zeus, Hades and Poseidon. Perseus, now a father himself, then goes on a quest to enter Tartarus, save Zeus, and defeat Ares. Achieving this, he then uses a super-weapon formed from Zeus' lightning bolt, Hades' pitchfork and Poseidon's trident to kill Kronos. In the aftermath, Perseus passes on his sword to his son, suggesting conflict will continue through the next generation too.

Aspects of both these films appear in *Immortals*, in which Theseus lives a quiet existence in a sea-shore village with his mother and an elderly surrogate father-figure (who is actually Zeus in disguise). King Hyperion invades, seeking a weapon of mass destruction called the Epirus Bow with which he can free the Titans from inside Tartarus as an act of revenge against the Gods for failing to save his family. As his men plunder the village the old man disappears and Theseus' mother is killed. Theseus swears revenge and leads the Greek army in defending Mount Tartarus, luring Hyperion's army into a narrow tunnel in a possible allusion to *300*. However, once inside Hyperion uses the Epirus Bow to free the titans, and despite Zeus's strict orders that Gods should not interfere with the affairs of mortals, he leads them in a fight with the titans, while Theseus kills Hyperion but is mortally wounded in the process. The film concludes years after these events, where Theseus' young son is being watched over by Zeus while Theseus joins an ongoing war between gods and titans in the heavens.

Among numerous allusions and borrowings from previous epics, these three films owe a particular debt to Disney's animated *Hercules* (1997). To date, this has not been acknowledged by the filmmakers or by critics. Nevertheless, the plot of *Hercules* bears a striking resemblance to the central narrative of *Wrath of the Titans* and *Immortals*, as well as moments of *Clash of the Titans* that do not derive from the original. In the Disney animation, we see Hercules as a baby separated from his divine parents and his immortality removed. Growing up with surrogate, mortal parents, he then learns of his Olympian origins and must prove himself over the course of the film. To save his father, Zeus, Hercules battles Hades, who seeks to

make himself king of the Gods by releasing the titans from their prison in Tartarus. There are numerous other motifs in the film which recur in these recent epics, but similar to their potential analogous readings, these comparisons appear to have been lost under the promotion of CG spectacle and action surrounding the more recent releases.

Similarly, the motif of mankind declaring war on the gods by withholding prayer is not indigenous to these films. In the original *Clash of the Titans*, the goddess Thetis asks Zeus what the future may bring for the gods if heroes like Perseus exist. He replies: "We would no longer be needed. But, for the moment, there is sufficient cowardice, sloth and mendacity down there on Earth to last forever." The suggestion is that the gods exist while mankind has a need to pray to them. Leterrier's film amalgamates this idea with the portrayal of the gods from *Jason and the Argonauts*. As Blanshard and Shahabudin explain: "Jason's wavering 'belief' is not about the existence of gods, but whether they are benevolent protectors of mankind, or callous chess-players with men as their pawns, fit only for sacrifice."[140] Martin Winkler has tried to explain how contemporary audiences may differ in their attitude towards the gods:

> Most of the religious differences between antiquity and today derive from the replacement of polytheism by more rigid monotheistic belief systems…today we believe in the concept of a free will that leaves decisions, especially those about good and evil, largely to ourselves. The Greeks and Romans had a different view: divine will, even if it is called destiny or fate, is decisive. It may be incomprehensible or senseless, but gods are not accountable.[141]

Clash of the Titans, *Wrath of the Titans* and *Immortals*, therefore, present a distinctly modern take on the classical relationship between gods and mortals. They represent the battle over free will and divine will; the same conflict that led Benioff and Petersen to omit the gods in *Troy* in order to present the war as the actions of mortals. Furthermore, in creating human characters that are, to some extent, rejecting the deities the films reiterate the basic freedom-versus-tyranny motif common to ancient world epics. Rather than accept divine will/tyranny, these heroes challenge it, and in so doing the gods come to respect them.

It is in this antagonistic relationship that the films do carry an element of allegorical significance. As discussed, a trope of the Vietnam War combat film was the abandonment of the soldier-son by the patriarchal institutions of government and military. In the case of these films, we see the protagonist sons are raised by

surrogate father figures. They were, to their knowledge, abandoned by their real fathers, and in the disjuncture between them and their gods/fathers we see the anti-authoritarian distrust of patriarchal institutions that informed many Vietnam War combat films. With these themes and motifs returning during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, it is possible that this has influenced the repeated portrayal of animosity between father-figures and sons in these films. Furthermore, like the combat films (and *Alexander*'s allusions to it), the heroes of these films embark on a quest which takes the form of a *katabatic* narrative. In *Clash of the Titans*, Perseus journeys with a company of soldiers and a psychopompous (Io and/or Sheikh Sulieman) into the Underworld to obtain an object (Medusa's head), and in so doing win's his father's support and respect. In *Wrath of the Titans*, Perseus must again travel into the Underworld, this time to rescue his father – who is being drained of his life-force by *his* father, Kronos. In *Immortals*, Theseus must enter Tartarus and stop Hyperion freeing the titans and his bravery inspires Zeus to finally step down from Olympus and intervene in mortal affairs. While Theseus is not Zeus' son, he has become a favourite of the god who fulfilled a father-like role for Theseus in the form of an elderly man (played by John Hurt). When Theseus dies, he is given a place in the heavens as an immortal.

Fig.2.8: Father-figures and sons in *Immortals* (left) and *Clash of the Titans* (right)

Similar to *300*, these films could be interpreted as offering a wish-fulfilment scenario whereby abandoned soldier-sons are reconciled with their fathers. This scenario is currently prevalent in blockbuster cinema, most notably in the superhero genre. Indeed, the Greek mythological heroes have often been compared to superheroes, including by the makers of these films.[142] Across recent works including *Batman Begins* (2005), *Iron Man* (2008), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and *Thor* (2011), we see the recurrent trope of the white male protagonist being abandoned in some

form by their father(-figure), but over the course of the narrative they are reconciled with them. One could therefore suggest that the Greek mythological epics, along with many superhero/comic book films released since 9/11 and/or the invasion of Iraq, are allegories for American distrust of patriarchal institutions, but in experiencing a period of hardship they ultimately find reconciliation and catharsis with their 'fathers'. One interpretation of these films is therefore that their narratives offer reassurance that traditional forms of patriarchal order will be restored, eventually. During the tumult of the War on Terror and conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the promise of restored order offered by these films – the majority of which were successful at the box office – has appeared to resonate with US audiences.

More specifically, what we are seeing in the Greek mythological films is the continued hybridisation between the ancient world epic and the comic book movie, a process that originated with *300*. These films foreground action, spectacle, and CG effects ahead of engaging with contemporary events, reinforced by their depiction of conflict between humans, gods, and monsters rather than nations. In so doing, the texts distance themselves from contemporary events. Perhaps because of this, their budgets and box office results have been consistently larger than those ancient world epics which purport to depict history rather than fantasy. This has created two distinct approaches to the ancient world epic in the current cycle, which has continued beyond the texts included in this thesis. 2014 saw the release of *Hercules*, itself based on a comic book, which in the *pepla* tradition starred the immense physical form of former wrestler Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson in the title role. Likewise, the Kellen Lutz-starring *The Legend of Hercules* (2014) mixes sets and location work with blue-/green-screen technology, while *300*'s sequel, *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), continues the aesthetic used by its predecessor. Compared to works such as *Alexander*, these films require less audience-awareness of historical debates and typically conclude with a more conventionally 'positive' ending, in which the hero emerges victorious and the antagonist is punished or killed. Since *Gladiator* and the relative commercial disappointments of *Troy* and *Alexander*, the ancient world epic genre has evidently shifted away from 'serious', arguably more 'realistic', depictions of warfare and the ancient world to stylised, fantastical, and comic book movie escapism, beginning with *300*.

300 reinvented the aesthetic of the ancient world epic by hybridising the genre with that of the comic book movie. Through the simplified format and storytelling of Miller's source novel, *300* omitted complex historical context and specific detail in favour of universal themes and a simple combat narrative. In so doing, *300* not only increased its accessibility over films such as *Alexander*, but also continued a trend of battle-orientated combat films seen in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*. As McCrisken and Pepper have summarised in relation to these combat films, so the same can be applied to *300*:

> their reliance on spectacular action sequences, their provision of trite shocks and constant reassurance, and their insistence that audiences succumb to the easy stimuli and sensation provided by computer-generated images of overdetermined historical events robbed of their particular significance, mean that they are just as intelligible and perhaps also appealing to audiences in Hong Kong as in Houston.[143]

Foremost among the universal aspects to *300*'s narrative is its utilisation of 'freedom'. The epics of the 1990s and early 2000s proved the device has worldwide audience appeal, while its repeated use in American political rhetoric following 9/11 leant the term a patriotic Americentrism to which *300*'s Spartans appear to allude. Indeed, Snyder's depiction of the Spartans provided audiences in early 2007 with an analogous representation of the muscular, hyper-masculine US soldier-son fighting for a morally just cause just as the fighting in Iraq was reaching a particularly bloody phase and more troops were being committed to the country. Furthermore, at the time *300* was released Iraq and Afghanistan War combat films had exhumed the tropes of the late 1970s and 1980s Vietnam War combat film, with particular focus on the abandoned, traumatised, and amoral soldier-son. While these films portrayed America's enemies as a concealed and yet omnipresent force waging a guerrilla war, in *300* the Spartans display their martial superiority fighting a clearly defined hoard of monstrous barbarians. In this respect, the film can be read as an analogous 'wish fulfilment fantasy' for US involvement in Iraq in much the same way *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was for the Vietnam War. However, whereas *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was produced many years after its war had ended, *300* was created with the conflict still raging. The filmmakers cannot have known what the situation in Iraq would be by the time the film was released. As this chapter has shown, the available evidence and Snyder's reluctance to confirm any particular reading of the film means that it is

unlikely that *300* was *meant* to be regarded as another *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. However, this does not eliminate the possibility that audiences – especially those in the US – responded to the film in a similar way. In this respect, there is little to support the theory that *300* is an analogous or allegorical representation of post-9/11 US involvement in the Middle East.

As I have argued in this chapter, *300* was an attempt to reinvent the ancient world epic in the aftermath of *Troy* and *Alexander* by utilising aspects of the combat film and comic book genres. The stylised aesthetic, universal themes and simple battle narrative circumvented the many obstacles that Greek epics have faced in the past. Its employment of comic book iconography further distanced the film from its predecessors, as well as distancing the material from contemporary and historical reality. While racially insensitive during a period of heightened tension between the US and Iran, the film's portrayal of the Persians is thematically effective as a product of Dilios' storytelling on the eve of Plataea. Furthermore, through Dilios' narration *300*, like *Alexander* and *Troy*, engages with the wider debate on the value of films in the study of history, by showing that oral history – as with written history – can be constructed and ideologically driven. While Dilios' account of Thermopylae is wildly fantastical, it is an effective piece of propaganda to prepare the Spartan troops for battle.

300's successors similarly allude to the transmission of stories: in *Clash of the Titans* Zeus promises Perseus that men will worship him for his feats, while in *Wrath of the Titans* Perseus hands his legacy (symbolised by his sword) over to his progeny, Helios. In *Immortals*, Theseus' son is being tutored by the village elder (again, Zeus in disguise) about his father's achievements while looking at a series of friezes depicting them. Unlike *300*, however, these films avoid the potential political backlash of depicting a clear East versus West conflict in favour of turning to the fantastical stories of Greek mythology, replete with gods and monsters, to distance their narratives from contemporary parallels.

By contrast, the films in Chapter Three move in an antithetical direction, stripping away the Technicolor grandeur commonly associated with Roman epics in favour of bloody, bleak and brutal depictions of frontier life during the Empire's occupation of Britain. Unlike *300* and its successors, these films and their makers appear to be

encouraging analogous readings of their works in relation to contemporary events, as I shall now discuss.

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[31] Hodkinson, "Sparta and the Soviet Union in U.S. Cold War Foreign Policy and Intelligence Analysis," 346, 348.
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Chapter Three – Rome of the Brave: America and Rome in *King Arthur* (2004), *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), and *The Eagle* (2011)

> As the months passed and as the insurgency intensified, anti-American sentiment became palpable, and the 'liberators' were increasingly seen as 'occupiers'.[1]

The above quote from Richard Melanson summarises the transformation of sentiment towards the US presence in Iraq following the initial invasion. The concept of the US and coalition forces 'liberating' the country connotes a temporary military action with a clear objective, while 'occupation' suggests a lack of further objectives and the potential for permanent military presence. Furthermore, the latter act could be interpreted as the act of an imperial power claiming territory as its own. This chapter explores four epics set during the Roman imperial period which all feature the Roman occupation of Britain in some form: *King Arthur* (2004), *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), and *The Eagle* (2011). Curiously, there is a lack of cinematic precedence in the ancient world epic for using this location. It is therefore of immense curiosity and potential significance that, of the relatively small number of ancient world epics which followed *Gladiator* (2000), there have been four mainstream releases to utilise this setting. In this chapter I therefore assess whether the occupation-themed narratives of these films could be regarded as analogues for the US-led occupation of Iraq and/or Afghanistan, and whether the depiction of imperialism in these films could also be read as an allegory for contemporary events.

Reading the films in this way is predicated on associating their depiction of Rome with America. As discussed in the Introduction, Rome and America have a history of cinematic parallels but, as will become evident, these four Roman-Britain epics depart from the Roman epics of the 1950s-1960s in a number of ways. Foremost among these features is the omission of visual iconography often associated with Rome and America, such as arenas and the senate. However, continuing the argument of genre hybridity discussed in the previous chapters, I explore how these films utilise elements of the combat film as well as the western to create new parallels between Rome and contemporary America.

ROMANS IN BRITAIN As discussed in the Introduction, the Roman epics of the 1950s-60s cycle would conventionally depict a hero who develops a relationship with a member of a disenfranchised group who are persecuted by Rome. This leads the protagonist to develop a greater understanding of Roman imperialism, which results in them: "turning their backs, physically or metaphorically, on Rome and its depravity."[2] Rome's power and brutality would be illustrated through scenes of spectacle, such as military parades through the forum, gladiatorial combats, or chariot races in immense arenas. These acts of indulgence and contempt for human life would be orchestrated by a Roman leader such as a general or, more commonly, the emperor. Within this framework, Christianity would often act as the catalyst for the protagonist's transformation, while his salvation, and rejection of Rome, would sometimes be symbolised in his death.

Where the Roman-Britain epics differ to their predecessors is that they carry little focus on Christianity as a source of salvation and feature none of the visual splendour of Rome. Instead, they present the wet, cold and mountainous vistas of ancient Britain, especially Scotland. It is not unusual for a Roman epic to feature a provincial setting; *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator* have opening acts based in Germania as well as sequences in Parthia and North Africa, respectively, while *Cleopatra* (1963) is largely set in Egypt. The numerous epics that feature Christ also include sequences set in Judaea. Roman-Britain, however, has been often overlooked with the notable exception of the British Hammer production *The Viking Queen* (1967). Directed by Don Chaffey, who had previously helmed *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *The Viking Queen* was one of Hammer's occasional forays into genres other than horror, and arrived during a period in which a number of their films were centred on female leads, such as *The Gorgon* (1964) and *She* (1965).[3] The film makes no attempt to achieve any semblance of historicity (Druids worship Zeus, the Britons are called Vikings, and the leader of the Iceni is called Priam), but in its depiction of an ancient British queen leading the Iceni in rebellion against Rome the narrative evidently draws inspiration from the historical figure of Boudicca (herself the inspiration for a 1927 film and a 2003 TV movie). However, the film is ultimately a fictional narrative loosely inspired by history, wherein the

protagonist goes by the name Salina. The production lacked the resources to match Hollywood's epics but, despite its limitations and plethora of confused historical allusions, it nonetheless grounds itself in the ancient world with the backdrop of Roman-occupied Britain. As a small scale British production the film bears similarities to *Centurion*, although its lack of interest in creating a feel of historical authenticity suggests it is closer in tone to *The Last Legion*. Indeed, Leon Nicholson has called Hammer's *The Viking Queen* "one of the wackiest, campest, most laughable misfires in their considerable filmography."[4]

Although *The Viking Queen* was not acknowledged by the critics – or even the makers – of the recent Roman-Britain films, it nonetheless contains certain tropes which would reappear in these films. Foremost, it reflects on the Roman experience in Britain as initially defined by a reaction to the weather and terrain. Within the opening sequence of the film, a Roman refers to Britain as a "bloody country", and we see soldiers crossing the landscape with close-up shots of the rain and muddy ground. As will be explored below, the more recent Roman-Britain films feature the British landscape far more extensively and symbolically than the cursory allusions to it in the opening scenes of Chaffey's film. *The Viking Queen* also subverts a convention of the 1950s-60s Hollywood epics, where a Roman male protagonist would typically develop a relationship with a member of a disenfranchised group and find salvation through joining them. While it begins this way, with a Roman solider falling in love with Salina, she then rejects him and declares war on Rome only to die in battle. This somewhat confused message is aiming to depict Salina as a tragic heroine, but it ultimately suggests that her fight for 'freedom' was a rash and essentially needless action into which she was pressured. In this respect, the current cycle's Roman-Britain epics return to the narrative model of the 1950s-60s whereby the Roman male protagonist does find salvation through their relationship with a Briton. In so doing, the films introduce the Roman occupation of Britain from the perspective of the occupiers rather than the occupied nation. If the films are therefore to be read allegorically, the current cycle places the audiences' sympathies with a character that is (initially) part of the imperialist power rather than the subjugated people.

Before analysing these films, however, it is worth summarising some of the basic history of Rome's annexation of Britain. Julius Caesar originally invaded Britain in 55 BC, essentially as a symbolic gesture to convince those in Rome that he should be granted command of his legions for a further five years. Without this invasion – staged late in the campaign year – he would have been recalled to Rome and lost the chance to earn further military renown. He staged a second invasion of Britain in 54 BC, but whether due to family tragedy or uprisings in Gaul he abandoned further expansion into the country, and his untimely death halted future conquests. Britain was subsequently dismissed as being of only "peripheral interest", to quote Breeze and Dobson, compared to the wealthy Eastern provinces until, in 42 AD, the country was invaded by Emperor Claudius.[5] This was also a stage-managed invasion, designed to appease critics in Rome who complained that Claudius lacked military success and honours. Subsequent years saw slow expansion and colonisation of Britain, securing much of England, Wales, and Southern Scotland; the latter marked by a string of frontier forts. Rebellions and small uprisings were not uncommon, and despite an advance into Scotland in 82 AD led by Julius Agricola, the expansion was ended due to Agricola's recall to Rome in 85 AD. Many of the units involved were then transferred to other locations in Europe.[6]

Fig.3.1: Arthur and his knights arrive at Hadrian's Wall in *King Arthur*

The building of Hadrian's Wall began in 122 AD. One of the few references for why the Wall was built derives from Hadrian's biographer, who states that it was "to separate the Romans from the barbarians."[7] The Wall is often mistaken for a defensive structure for Rome to protect their territory from attack by the northern tribes. Many historians favour the argument that it was essentially a glorified administration post: what Breeze and Dobson describe as "the establishment of a tidy method of controlling movement into and out of the Empire."[8] The Roman military were trained to fight on open ground and the design of the wall lacked the necessary space for soldiers to patrol or defend it. Instead, small forts or houses covered the various gateways built into the wall and were designed to monitor the movement of traders and farmers, prevent petty raiding, and stall a larger assault. In the event of the latter occurring, a messenger would travel to a nearby legionary encampment and lead the army to open ground on which to meet the invaders.[9] However, much of this period was peaceful. One reason why Roman Britain may not have been utilised by filmmakers in the past is, as Jon Solomon suggests, because: "The second century AD brought the zenith of the Roman Empire, with relative peace presided over by sane, even excellent emperors, whose successions followed smoothly. Good governance, bad drama: few films."[10]

The films in this chapter, however, are largely inspired by legends as opposed to historical events, although all take (to varying degrees) a euhemeristic approach to their narratives. *King Arthur* and *The Last Legion* both depict the foundations of Arthurian legend as originating in the collapse of the Roman Empire. While the legend of Arthur and his knights is often depicted as a medieval story – conventionally inspired by Thomas Malory's 15th century work *Le Morte d'Arthur* – these films take place at the end of the Roman Empire and beginning of the Dark Ages. Similarly, *The Last Legion*, *Centurion*, and *The Eagle* all feature the legend surrounding the disappearance of the historical Ninth Legion. Supposedly, the Ninth were one of Rome's most decorated legions but after marching into Scotland they were never seen again. One theory – which *Centurion* and *The Eagle* reproduce – is that the legion was massacred by the native Britons. However, this theory has been disproved, as Breeze and Dobson reiterate:

> It is, however, clear that the Ninth Legion was not destroyed in Britain at this time, as used to be thought. The legion was certainly still in existence in the 130s and recent theories suggest

> that it was transferred to Lower Germany from Britain by Trajan or Hadrian and moved thence to one of the eastern provinces, possibly being destroyed in Armenia by the Parthians in 161.[11]

Nevertheless, the legend appealed to *Centurion*'s director Neil Marshall, and was in keeping with the recurrent themes of his work, as discussed below. *The Eagle* is based on a popular children's story from the 1950s, so although the central motivation of the film is connected to a now non-existent historical event, the narrative itself focusses on two young men going on an adventure. The legend of the Ninth ultimately allowed the filmmakers a certain amount of artistic licence in their narrative and content. Despite this freedom none of the films analysed in this chapter were notable box office successes. Reviews were generally average to poor, with most critics complaining that their scale or their subject matter failed to rival that of their predecessors; ultimately being what Peter Travers termed "*Gladiator*-lite".[12]

Where the reception of these films becomes of significant for this study, however, is in the references to Iraq and Afghanistan that appear in occasional reviews, interviews and features: principally in relation to *Centurion* and *The Eagle*. Unlike the Greek epics of the first two chapters, where there is a relative discrepancy between filmmakers' interpretations of their work and those of the critical community, here the two largely operate in unison. This extends to analogous and allegorical readings of the film, as well as their generic debt to the themes, tropes and iconography inspired by the western genre. Ward Briggs attempted a similar reading of *Gladiator*, in which he identifies allusions to western films in a limited number of sequences of Scott's film.[13] However, his argument does not go beyond intertextual acknowledgment, and does not suggest *Gladiator* draws any syntactic elements of the western into the ancient world epic. As will become evident, the Roman-Britain epics in this chapter are indebted to the western to a far greater degree. I will discuss how, in removing the urban iconography common to the Roman epics of the 1950s-60s cycle, these films employ themes, imagery and narrative devices common to the western in the creation of allegory.

ROME ON THE RANGE In many ways the western is the quintessential American genre. Its roots lie in the foundations of American society from the earliest days of colonialism and connect contemporary US audiences with their country's history

through numerous books, films, television series, tourist sites, and iconic and infamous figures. Although undoubtedly influenced by various attempts by early settlers to manufacture a national myth, the symbolic significance of 'the frontier' has grown over time and created an American mythology; albeit one that contains allusions to European – including classical – mythology. This mythology was disseminated among the nation's population thanks to the development of the printing press and the advent of newspapers and books. Shows such as those staged by 'Buffalo Bill' were also a popular form of entertainment: one which then found its successor in early twentieth century cinema. Silent films such as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) entertained audiences through depicting American history while simultaneously mythologizing it, and such films could be viewed alongside the silent ancient world epics produced around the same time.[14] Like the ancient world epic, the western also experienced a brief hiatus during the 1930s when the pessimism of the Great Depression and prohibition provided rich source material for the gangster film. However, the western returned in the post-war years, where it remained a recurrent feature of cinema schedules until the late 1970s when releases became sporadic.

John Lenihan has argued that the western is a symbolic vehicle with which to reflect issues in contemporary society, such as gender, race, and politics.[15] As he argues, "The Western movie is one of the mechanisms a democratic society used to give form and meaning to its worries about its own destiny at a time when its position seemed more central and its values less secure than ever before."[16] Indeed, the themes of the western have made it a distinctly 'usable past' for myth-making and adaptation. As Jim Kitses describes: "at its core the Western marries historical and archetypal elements in a fruitful mix that allows different film-makers a wide latitude of creative play."[17] Kitses goes on to discuss how the syntactic elements of the genre have been appropriated by various other genres, which in turn complicates the process of identifying the western's own tropes.[18] One reason the western is so adaptable is that its basic mythology is one centred on a point of contact between two opposing concepts and the violence which ensues. This can therefore be applied to a range of narratives. Richard Slotkin identifies the basis for this motif in how:

> the first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation; but the means to that regeneration ultimately became

> the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.[19]

This violence is frequently conducted by men and directed towards a native 'Other'. This has led Lenihan to define the basic premise of the western as: "civilization supplants wilderness", with the frontier marking the liminal space in which these dichotomies collide.[20] As Kitses explains: "these oppositions capture the profound ambivalence that dominates America's history and character. Was the West a Garden threatened by the corrupt and emasculating East? Or was it a Desert, a savage land needful of civilising and uplift?"[21] Imperialist expansion into the wilderness with the aim to 'civilise' the land brought the frontiersmen into violent contact with the Native American Indians in a continuous process of displacement and conflict commonly referred to as the 'savage war'.[22] The Indians therefore became synonymous with the wilderness, with the former being depicted as harsh and as unforgiving as the landscape itself. In Slotkin's words, they became the "demonic personification of the American wilderness."[23] This is reflected in a number of western films: in *The Searchers* (1956), for example, Indian characters kidnap, rape, and murder young girls. In the Anthony Mann westerns *Bend of the River* (1952) and *Winchester '73* (1950), the Indians attack travellers for no clear reason, and the sequences in which they attack carry no major relevance for the plot: they are simply a hazard of the wilderness.

Fig.3.2: Etain, the demonic personification of the British wilderness, in *Centurion*

By contrast, the Western hero exists in the liminal space between wilderness and civilisation. Kitses describes them as being: "between the nomadic and the settled, the savage and the cultured, the masculine and the feminine."[24] Slotkin expands on these contradictory attributes by describing the metaphorical journey the archetypal western hero must go on:

> The American must cross the border into 'Indian Country' and experience a 'regression' to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the 'metropolis' can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted. Although the Indian and the Wilderness are the settler's enemy, they also provide him with the new consciousness through which he will transform the world.[25]

Furthermore, the frontier hero must occasionally act, according to Slotkin, "as mediator or interpreter between races and cultures but more often as civilisation's most effective instrument against savagery."[26] For example, Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* understands how the Indians fight and think and can even speak their language. Although his prejudice and racism prevent him from becoming a good man, he nevertheless appears as a western hero through his ability to survive in the wilderness. The iconic closing shot of Ford's film, looking out through the open doorway at Edwards, is symbolic of his struggle between the wilderness on the outside and civilisation within. Although he fights to protect the family within the home, he realises he is a man of the wilderness, as savage as the Indians he hates, and he remains outside.

The hero's traversal of civilisation and wilderness often takes the form of a *katabasis* narrative, in which the wilderness symbolises the underworld and the natives the ghosts or bestial threats contained therein. The liminal space between civilisation and wilderness – the frontier – acts as the barrier the hero and his companions must cross to enter the underworld. Although Slotkin does not refer to the *katabasis* by this name, his description of the western's appropriation of European mythology emulates its tropes:

> In the mythology of Europe, the West and its peoples were strongly associated with the kingdom of death and dreams, the underworld – in psychological terms, the unconscious. In the archetypal mythology of the heroic quest, which informs all accounts of the Age of Discovery, it is the journey to the underworld that is the essential, necessary action.[27]

If we equate a journey into the wilderness to obtain regeneration as equal to a journey into the underworld to find an object or personal knowledge, then the *katabasis* narrative lies at the heart of the frontier mythology. Indeed, Holtsmark cites

westerns as one of the exponents of the *katabasis* narrative in film, with *The Searchers* and *The Professionals* (1966) being examples.[28] I would also add *True Grit* (2010) to this list: Mattie Ross desires to kill Tom Chaney to avenge the murder of her father. To reach him she requires a *psychopompos*, a companion familiar with the landscape, which she finds in the form of Rooster Cogburn. Together they cross a river (a boundary line) and venture into Indian country where they encounter strange characters (including bestial figures dressed in animal skins) and eventually find and kill Chaney. However, Mattie suffers a terrible price for her expedition – losing her arm and barely escaping with her life – and emerges with newfound knowledge.

As has been seen, the *katabasis* narrative was an effective tool to represent the descent into hell of soldiers in the Vietnam War. A convergence of the *katabasis* and allusions to Vietnam can also be found in westerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Little Big Man* (1970). In these films, white characters from 'civilised' society cross over into the wilderness and become part of Native American society. Through this process they learn about the brutality of American imperialism when they witness the US cavalry – in scenes reminiscent of the My Lai massacre – murder the inhabitants of a peaceful village.[29] These films are evidence of what Steve Neale calls the "counterculture and revisionist westerns", which he argues are typified by their "rejection of the imperialism inherent in America's 'frontier mythology' and in its post-war 'victory culture'."[30]

In my analysis of the Roman-Britain films I explore the manner in which the themes and motifs of civilisation and wilderness, the western hero, the native/savage, the *katabasis* narrative, criticism of imperialism, and the frontier become recurrent tropes of this particular group of ancient world epics. That these films should embrace aspects of the western is partially through the genre's associations with America, while also reflecting an aspect of political rhetoric used by the Bush administration during the War on Terror. Stacy Takacs, for instance, has argued that following 9/11: "Politicians and pundits alike depicted Americans as innocents besieged by wild savages and desperate for strong men with guns to rescue them."[31] George W. Bush was even pictured donning a Stetson on his Texas ranch to emphasise his home-grown, all-American identity, and during one public appearance in 2001 he

discussed the search for Bin Laden, remarking: “There’s an old poster out West, as I recall, that said, ‘Wanted: Dead or Alive.”[32] Acknowledging the recurrent trends and cycles influenced by the Vietnam War that have returned during the Iraq War, it seems fitting that elements of the western – including revisionist westerns themselves – should be repeated.

KING ARTHUR Scripted by David Franzoni (with whom the story of *Gladiator* originated) and directed by Antoine Fuqua, *King Arthur* reimagines the medieval legend as a combat film set against the collapse of the Roman Empire. Fuqua had prior experience of the latter genre with *Tears of the Sun* (2003), an R-rated (15) combat film about a small, elite team of US soldiers who are sent into foreign hostile territory to rescue an American citizen. Surveying the situation, they ultimately decide to escort a number of native peoples who are also under threat to the safety of the nearest border while fending off a numerically superior army. As is evidenced below, the film’s plot is remarkably similar to that of *King Arthur*. Fuqua intended to bring the same levels of violent intensity to his ancient world epic, but clashed with producer Jerry Bruckheimer and the studio after they decided they wanted the film to be a PG-13 release suitable for younger audiences. On the Director’s Commentary track accompanying the US release of the film on DVD, Fuqua bemoans the later stages of filming and the editing process on the film. He describes how some sequences, such as the battle on the frozen lake, had to be redesigned before they could be shot, while other scenes which were already completed had to be altered. Digital effects were implemented to remove sight of blood, violent imagery in the battle scenes were abbreviated or cut altogether, and comic scenes were added to lighten the tone. He concludes that: “my movie that I shot was being chipped away, as far as I was concerned. The tone of the movie, the ideas of the movie, were all changed…I would come in [to edit] and just want to slit my throat I was so depressed.”[33] Some critics, such as *Total Film*’s Andy Lowe, commented on these aspects in the finished film, noting that: “*King Arthur* often resembles a ‘For Schools’ dramatization: a clean, clipped history lesson…It’s all a little soulless and, yes, bloodless too…for a film so grounded in history, a little reality wouldn’t have gone amiss.”[34]

Perhaps because of Fuqua's displeasure with the theatrical cut, he does not appear in publicity for the film as prominently as many of the other directors discussed in this thesis. As such, his commentary track has proved a particularly valuable source for engaging with his aims for the film. Furthermore, while a number of the films featured in this thesis were to receive alternate, extended cuts months or years after their initial release, *King Arthur* was released in both its 12-rated theatrical cut and separately as a 15-rated 'Director's Cut' on the same day. Viewing the two versions provides an interesting contrast between the version marketed and reviewed, and the version which appears to be closest to Fuqua's vision. While both versions follow the same narrative and have the same basic tone, themes, and content, the Director's Cut reorders some scenes, adds others, and removes some of the cruder, comic scenes seen in the theatrical cut. In so doing, it is noticeably bleaker, more violent, and places a greater emphasis on the experiences of the knights as soldiers who have endured many years of combat trauma. In so doing, their desire for freedom and the anti-imperialist message of the film, as shall be discussed, is far more evident in the Director's Cut and arguably reflects the intentions of both director and writer to a greater extent than the version seen by critics and audiences upon the film's theatrical release.

King Arthur opens with text stating "historians agree" that Arthurian legend was inspired by an actual figure from the Dark Ages, and "recently discovered archaeological evidence sheds light on his true identity." Franzoni's Arthur is a Christian soldier with both Roman and British parentage, who is charged with commanding a band of Sarmatian knights bound by decree to serve the Roman Empire. The narrative begins in 467 AD as the knights prepare to receive their freedom after fifteen years of service in the Roman military defending the territory along Hadrian's Wall from the Woads: native Britons opposed to Roman rule. However, the knights are informed by Bishop Germanius that Rome is abandoning Britain, and before they can be discharged they must perform a final mission to go beyond the Wall and rescue a Roman family from the invading Saxons. During the operation, Arthur discovers the family have imprisoned and tortured a number of Britons in the name of Rome and Christianity, and that such behaviour is rife throughout the empire. Among the prisoners is a Woad woman, Guinevere, with whom Arthur falls in love. As the Saxons arrive at the Wall, he and his men choose

to stay and fight alongside the Woads and forsake their allegiance to Rome. Defeating the Saxons, Arthur weds Guinevere and remains with his surviving knights in Britain.

While the narrative contains identifiable aspects of Arthurian legend, the film adheres to a number of tropes associated with Roman epics. Chief among these is the trope of 'freedom', familiar from Chapter Two's analysis of *300*. Arthur's knights desire freedom from their military service, while the Britons fight for freedom from foreign occupation. This associates them with the aforementioned 'disenfranchised group' motif commonly seen in Roman epics, such as the slaves in *Spartacus* (1960) or the Christians in *The Robe* (1953). The treatment of Guinevere and the betrayal of trust shown to Arthur's knights by Germanius reiterates the Roman disregard for life evidenced by their enjoyment of gladiatorial games in *Spartacus*, *Quo Vadis*, and Franzoni's own *Gladiator*. As with *The Robe*, *Quo Vadis*, *Gladiator*, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the narrative also begins with Arthur belonging to the Roman system, but through his relationship with Guinevere his loyalty transfers to that of the Britons.

There are, however, two significant differences between *King Arthur* and the Roman epics that preceded it. The first of these is that Christianity is no longer a source of salvation for the protagonist but rather another vice contributing to his rejection of Rome. Most Roman epics mentioned above are set in the first century AD where Christianity is an emerging cult rather than a predominant religion. In the fifth century AD, Christianity was the dominant religion of the Roman Empire and as such Arthur begins the film as both a Roman and a Christian. His religious beliefs derive from Pelagius, a Christian priest who becomes a surrogate father figure for Arthur after his real father's death. Although Pelagius is only seen in the Director's Cut release, he is referenced in both versions: Arthur informs Bishop Germanius that Pelagius' "teachings on free will and equality have been a great influence." This immediately asserts Arthur as a contemporary, liberal hero existing in a historical past. He openly accepts his knights' decision to follow the "religion of their forefathers" rather than converting to Christianity, although his knights rarely speak of faith. At times, Arthur's Christianity acts as a point of tension in his friendship with Lancelot, who interrupts his prayer with the line: "Why do you always talk to God and not to me?" Following the ambush on the wagon train in the opening act, the knights mock Horton, the

servant of Germanius, for praying. Gawain advises him to “Save your prayers, boy, your god doesn’t live here”, while Bors intimidatingly describes Woads as “blue demons who eat Christians alive.” He then mumbles unintelligible pseudo-Latin prayer, asking Horton: “Does this really work?”

Fig.3.3: Bors mocks Horton’s religion in *King Arthur*

Arriving at Hadrian’s Wall, Bishop Germanius discovers and destroys Arthur’s treasured image of Pelagius; a symbol of Germanius’ disregard for free will and equality. He then uses Arthur’s devotion to Rome and to God to blackmail him into undertaking the mission to rescue “the Pope’s favourite godchild and pupil”, Alecto, son of Marius. Although Arthur concedes, he warns Germanius to keep his promise of freedom for the knights should they return, or else “not even God himself will protect you”. Before departing, Arthur makes a heartfelt prayer to God to watch over his men, offering his own life as a willing sacrifice if it ensures their safety and freedom. Upon reaching Marius’ villa, Arthur discovers that he has exploited and punished the local populace through manipulating his role as “a spokesman for God.” He then discovers a series of underground chambers wherein Christian fanatics have tortured native Britons whom they regard as “sinners”, and watch over their dying and decaying bodies. Seeing the numerous manacled, emaciated corpses, Lancelot asks Arthur: “Is this the work of your god?” They then discover a young boy, Lucan, and Guinevere are still alive and free them. During the return

journey to Hadrian's Wall, Arthur relocates Guinevere's dislocated fingers, whereupon she speaks her first lines: "They tortured me with machines. To make me tell them things that…that I didn't know to begin with." Alecto informs Arthur that Pelagius was excommunicated and killed because his views on equality countered those of Germanius and others. He adds that Marius' actions are emblematic of Rome itself, and that Arthur's idealised vision of Rome "doesn't exist, except in your dreams." This is the second time Franzoni deconstructs his protagonist's idealised image of Rome: in *Gladiator*, Maximus similarly regards Rome as "the light" of the empire, but upon his arrival he discovers it is corrupt and violent.

In the final act of *King Arthur* – the defence of Hadrian's Wall/Battle of Baden Hill – references to Christianity are almost non-existent. This suggests that in his rejection of Rome Arthur has also renounced his Christianity. At the end of the battle, cradling Lancelot's corpse, he recalls his earlier prayer and shouts to the heavens: "It was my life to be taken. Not this. Never this." As Arthur has been betrayed by Rome, he has also been betrayed by God. In the next scene Lancelot's body is burned. His closing narration in which he, like Odysseus, suggests that the preceding events inspired the familiar legend – and thus he, Arthur and the knights will be remembered – was meant to appear here, but following test screenings an additional 'happy ending' was added wherein Arthur and Guinevere marry. This confuses the issue of Arthur's faith, as Merlin appears to fulfil a priestly role in the marriage ceremony but the ritual is taking place in a pagan stone circle, so it could equally mean Arthur has joined the Britons' religion or else they have become Christian.

In this ambiguity, however, *King Arthur* subverts the conventional ending of the Roman epic from the 1950s-60s cycle, as there is no clear confirmation that Arthur has regained his faith. This could be regarded as reflecting the growing pessimism of post-9/11 cinema that Kevin Wetmore has explored in relation to the horror genre. Wetmore has suggested that since 9/11, horror cinema has been typified by downbeat, sometimes nihilistic denouements, as well as a growing use of religious subject matter in which devils, demons and exorcisms have become recurrent tropes.[35] In some cases, such as *The Mist* (2007) and *Black Death* (2010), religious fundamentalists are as much a threat as alien or supernatural forces, and to some extent *King Arthur* reflects this in its depiction of Christianity and torture.

The bleakness of Fuqua's film – even in the theatrical cut – also distinguishes it from the epics of the 1950s-60s cycle which typically contrasted the provinces of the empire with the grandeur and spectacle of Rome itself. In *King Arthur*, we never see Rome's urban metropolis with its forum, arenas and so forth. Instead, our vision of Rome's empire is limited to its frontier which, to paraphrase Maximus, is brutal, cruel and dark. A number of critics noted *King Arthur*'s un-Romantic, colourless and bleak portrayal of the Arthurian legend, subverting expectations of a colourful and light-hearted romp familiar from some previous cinematic depictions.[36] This aspect is best realised in the Director's Cut, but is nevertheless present in the theatrical cut. Compared to the Technicolor spectacle of the 1950s-60s Roman epics, *King Arthur*'s colour palette more clearly evokes the opening sequence of *Gladiator* on the Germanic frontier, being composed of greys, blues, greens and browns. The climate is cold and the weather harsh and unforgiving. Despite a stark beauty to the film's depiction of Roman Britain, *King Arthur* undercuts the glory and spectacle of imperialism that is paraded by the Romans of the 1950s-60s cycle, and begs the question as to the value of these places of "peripheral interest" and their contribution to what *Gladiator*'s Marcus Aurelius calls "the glory of Rome".

King Arthur shows an empire in decline, corrupt at its core, and in retreat. Susan Aronstein has regarded Arthur's rejection of Rome and, by association, Christianity, as a critique of American politics following 9/11:

> By figuring Rome, the supposed ambassador of the *Pax Romana*, as a corrupt imperialist force that – in the name of Christianity and under the cover of God's will – offers its conquered subjects not freedom but exploitation, and portraying Arthur as a well-meaning general who has been duped by empty rhetoric into serving and promoting Rome's ethnocentric ends, *King Arthur* questions America's foreign and martial agenda.[37]

She contrasts the film to the Arthurian legend as it is depicted in the Clinton-era medieval epic, *First Knight* (1995). The earlier film's protagonist, Lancelot, has neglected his Christianity after his mother and father are killed inside a church, and he lives by a code of isolationism and self-interest. However, when brought into Camelot – a setting symbolic of Christianity by the repetitious use of crosses in the *mise-en-scène* and references to God and prayer – Lancelot is inspired by Arthur's example to defend the city and its people. As Aronstein summarises, "*First Knight*, like Bill Clinton, offered Americans a community of hope in which citizens served each other and America fulfilled its humanitarian responsibilities to a global village."[38]

This echoes the arguments made in the Introduction to the transformation of the combat film during the 1990s and early 2000s, wherein the American military was portrayed as offering humanitarian support to the global village in works such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), and Fuqua's *Tears of the Sun*.

In *King Arthur*, however, Rome/America is a decaying and corrupt Christian empire that occupies foreign countries and metes out punishment to the natives using torture and imprisonment. The association between Christianity and torture in *King Arthur* is a complex issue. The judicial use of torture through 'trial by ordeal' was used by Christians during the medieval period, although Roman law also allowed it in certain circumstances, such as the torture of slaves in pre-trial situations.[39] *King Arthur* walks the line between being a Roman and medieval epic, but the emphasis it gives to Christians punishing those who do not adhere to their religion is not unrealistic within the Roman Empire. Almost a hundred and fifty years before *King Arthur* is set, Constantine took control of the empire and made Christianity the predominant religion. The Council of Nicaea, consisting of two-hundred and fifty bishops, created a series of 'articles of faith' in 325 AD. These included rulings that any Jewish person who obstructs another Jew from converting to Christianity (something, one assumes, Rabbis would attempt) would be put to death, and any Christian converting to Judaism would have his property confiscated.[40] Although these acts targeted the Jewish faith, the persecution of those not belonging to the Roman-Christian faith provides a basis for the employment of torture in *King Arthur*.

Torture has also become a divisive topic of discussion within the War on Terror and subsequent conflicts. The American use of torture in recent history is complicated by the ambiguity as to where 'torture' actually occurs, due to the hazy distinction between psychological and physical torture. Experiments into psychological torture began in earnest under President Eisenhower during the Korean War. Techniques were developed that included sensory deprivation and prolonged standing/stress positions. During the Vietnam War, these techniques developed into more violent physical torture in the CIA's Phoenix programme: Vietcong suspects were starved and abused (including beatings and electrocution), with prisoners kept in small 'tiger cages'. It is estimated that between 20,000-40,000 Vietnamese were killed as a product of the Phoenix programme, with 6,187 in 1969 alone.[41] Nonetheless, the CIA

continued its investigations into torture and interrogation techniques. Through the 1970s and 1980s, they instructed various Latin-American groups in the use of coercive psychological techniques that would cause immense distress to detainees without leaving physical marks, such as water-boarding.[42]

Fig.3.4: Guinevere is discovered in a cell in *King Arthur*

Under the Clinton administration, the UN Convention Against Torture was ratified despite containing a minor loophole to Article 17 of the third Geneva Convention which states that: "No physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever."[43] The slightly ambiguous nature of the word 'mental' has since been exploited by the US to allow for various forms of psychological coercion which they do not regard as being 'mental torture'. Nevertheless, the majority of prisoners subjected to psychological techniques do suffer extreme trauma, including what Flynn and Salek describe as:

> despair and depression, social withdrawal, psychic numbing and death anxiety, sleep disturbances, and a pervading sense of mortification. Their sense of self is usually very fragmented; torture survivors often actively consider suicide, and they consider themselves to be broken.[44]

Clinton also approved the system known as 'extraordinary rendition', whereby terror suspects can be exported into the possession of other regimes that are less

restricted in their interrogation techniques. In the wake of 9/11, extraordinary rendition, CIA black sites, and military prisons would become synonymous with President Bush's War on Terror.[45] In media and political debates the employment of 'torture' was defended by the Bush administration by citing the so-called 'ticking time bomb' scenario: if a terrorist attack was imminent, should torture be used to extract information that might prevent the attack? McCoy has dismissed this as "a hypothetical elaboration of an exercise in academic philosophy so remote from reality it is tantamount to fantasy."[46] Nevertheless, President Bush argued that attacks had indeed been averted through information gathered via alternative interrogation techniques.[47] Public support for the employment of torture was arguably enhanced by its representation in film and television after 9/11. Numerous thrillers, including *Man on Fire* (2004) and *Taken* (2008), depict the hero using brutal physical torture to extract information from suspects that leads to the rescue of young women who have been kidnapped. However, these examples pale in comparison to the array of techniques used by Jack Bauer, the lead character of the television series *24* (2001-). He utilises knives, kneecapping, blow-torches, suffocation, electrocution and more to interrogate suspects, who almost always reveal their complicity in terrorist activity and give up valuable information which saves lives and stops ticking time bombs. However, the Red Cross estimated in 2004 that between 70-90 percent of those held in Iraq and Afghanistan were innocent of any terrorist or counterinsurgency activities.[48] Nevertheless, characters such as Jack Bauer have lead McCoy and others to suggest that television and film have made the use of torture seem acceptable, justified, and necessary in real-world situations; justifying the policies of the Bush administration.[49]

The very fact that torture has become such a common feature of post-9/11 film and television is suggestive of its acceptance within the public imagination surrounding the War on Terror. McCoy has compared this phenomenon with the increasingly graphic depictions of torture in medieval art that coincided with its growth in usage at the time.[50] Wetmore and film critic Kim Newman have likewise attributed the emergence of the 'torture porn' subgenre in American horror cinema as a product of torture's predominance in international discussion.[51] What differs between these depictions and the pervading reality of contemporary employment of torture is the dichotomy between causing physical pain on the one hand and psychologically

humiliating the prisoner on the other. Many of the depictions of torture in post-9/11 film and television focus on physical torture and body horror. However, the revelations surrounding Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay and other sites reveal the intensity of cultural and sexual humiliation incorporated into the psychological interrogation methods used by US personnel. Instead of causing direct physical pain, the post-9/11 techniques place greater emphasis on degrading prisoners. McCoy quotes from a memorandum delivered to US troops in Abu Ghraib in August 2003 directing them to use isolation, stress positions, yelling, loud music and light control (including sensory deprivation), as well as the "Presence of Military Working Dogs [because it] Exploits Arab fear of dogs while maintaining security during interrogations."[52] Similarly, Flynn and Salek summarise techniques used at Guantánamo Bay (many of which also applied to Abu Ghraib):

> At Guantánamo 20 percent of the interrogators were women, and they regularly sexually tormented the detainees in hopes of "severing their relationship with God." Female interrogators wiped fake menstrual blood on a detainee (which made him feel dirty and prevented him from praying), rubbed their breasts against the prisoners' backs and mocked their erections, roughly grabbed prisoners' genitals, threatened them with rape, and often interrogated Muslims who were forced to wear bikinis, lingerie, and thong underwear. But the methods they employed weren't solely confined to these sexual hijinks; they also defiled the Qur'an, banged the detainee's heads on tables, and bent back the thumbs of several detainees.[53]

The specificity of these techniques to target the religious/cultural identity of the prisoners raises questions as to whether the War on Terror (and by extension the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan) may constitute a 'religious war'. These revelations split public opinion in America: while some, such as Susan Sontag, abhorred the images and regarded it as a sign of America's loss of moral respectability, others like popular radio presenter Rush Limbaugh dismissed the images from Abu Ghraib as simply being "a good time" and an "emotional release" for the soldiers.[54] Some senators feared that proliferation of the images would increase anger at the US and further endanger American military personnel abroad.[55] Further revelations that these actions derived from directives within the CIA and the Bush administration threatened to lose popular support for the war. Despite the best efforts of the administration to defend its methods of interrogation, in 2006 the UN Human Rights Commission officially defined the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay as "torture".[56] Senator Dianne Feinstein, chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, stated in 2011:

> coercive and abusive treatment of detainees in US custody was far more systematic and widespread than we thought. Moreover, the abuse stemmed from … [the] fact that the line was blurred between what is permissible and impermissible conduct, putting US personnel in an untenable position with their superiors and the law.[57]

The relationship between the government, military and national security with torture has become a recurrent feature of film and television post-9/11, with a notable shift of emphasis from previous depictions. Flynn and Salek summarise:

> In films made prior to 2001 the torturer was usually a fascist, a depraved outlaw, a rogue cop or serviceman, or a madman. Over the last decade the torturers have been counterterrorism agents, CIA or former CIA agents, and even Batman is one – when superheroes and agents sworn to uphold the Constitution are torturers, the ethical and professional rot is profound.[58]

The perpetrators of torture in *King Arthur* are likewise members of the patriarchal institution occupying a foreign country. Keira Knightley, who plays Guinevere, has said of her character's imprisonment:

> I talked to Antoine [Fuqua] quite a lot about the back-story and we did decide that she was leading an attack and got captured and put in jail, where she got tortured as well – definitely tortured. … What we're looking at is Guinevere as a guerrilla leader – she's fighting for an occupied nation.[59]

As such, Guinevere could be regarded as an allusion to Iraqi and Afghan resistance fighters (or terrorists), imprisoned by the predominantly Christian Rome/America and tortured. As she reveals to Arthur, she told her torturers things "that I didn't know to begin with." Furthermore, her experience does nothing to lessen her dedication to the cause of freeing Britain from foreign rule, and as soon as her hand heals she uses it to fire a bow and arrow, first killing Marius and then assisting Arthur and his knights against the Saxons. In short, Guinevere's portrayal shows the ineffectiveness of torture in obtaining information or dissuading its victims from future action.

Some critics identified this allusion; Roger Ebert describes the film as "a story with uncanny parallels to current events in Iraq" with Guinevere's torture occurring with "Geneva and its Convention safely in the future".[60] While the apparent allusions to contemporary events shape *King Arthur* into a likely allegory for the American occupation of Iraq and/or Afghanistan, this is contested by alternate readings of the film. As discussed in Chapter One, identifying the 'author' of a film is highly problematic. In the case of *King Arthur*, Fuqua does not appear as prominently in articles on the film as Oliver Stone, Wolfgang Petersen or Zack Snyder did with their respective works. One could suggest, as mentioned above, that this was as a result of the changes made to the film for its theatrical cut. These changes may have

derived from Jerry Bruckheimer, the Hollywood producer who was behind some of the most financially successful films of the 1980s and 1990s, and appeared to be continuing his winning run prior to *King Arthur* with the release of *Black Hawk Down* and *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003). Joseph Sullivan has suggested that critics who regarded *King Arthur* as "pro-American, pro-Bush, or even pro-military" were seeing Bruckheimer's influence on the film.[61] Sullivan quotes the producer as stating that Arthur and his knights: "are like [US] Special Forces, wherever they are now, fighting for another country. It's heroism, camaraderie, brotherhood. They are fighting for what they believe in, for the moral high ground, all the kinds of themes I love."[62] However, Sullivan argues that while Bruckheimer was behind the addition of the 'happy ending', Fuqua and Franzoni had greater influence in the overall creation of meaning. For Franzoni the film was inspired not by America's role in the War on Terror, Afghanistan or Iraq, but rather by Vietnam. Sullivan interprets Franzoni's aims as creating a film which was: "distinctly anti-war and anti-expansionist and was anchored in the pre-9/11 world."[63] Franzoni's script reportedly pre-dates 9/11 and was presented to Bruckheimer in the summer of 2000 following the release of *Gladiator*. It was intended to be an allegory for the Vietnam War, with Franzoni stating in an interview that:

> Between the Americans and the Romans there is no difference. With the best intentions they come to a country to free it from the barbarians. But soon the problems start. They don't understand the other culture. And they need violence to establish their leadership. They torture and humiliate their prisoners of war.[64]

In the Director's Commentary track Fuqua appears to support Franzoni's approach to the material. He describes conversations he had with the film's military advisor, Harry Humphries (who had also worked on *Black Hawk Down* and *Tears of the Sun*), in which they discussed the similarities between the narrative's envisioning of Roman Britain and that of the Vietnam War. Fuqua regards Arthur's knights as being like the French and American armies in Vietnam, while the Woads utilise their environment to wage a guerrilla war to expel a foreign enemy in a manner similar to the Vietcong. Fuqua then progresses to discuss the sequences in which Rome abandons the Wall and leave Britain, adding that it:

> reminds me a lot of what's happening today…with America in Iraq and when America was in Vietnam…we fight these wars and…and we leave the land, and these people have to figure it out for themselves…This was a big scene for me, because it really speaks to what's happening today and with Rome and who we are.[65]

Similar to the films discussed in the previous chapters, Franzoni's *King Arthur* therefore becomes a hybridisation of the combat film and Roman epic, and is a further example of a film in which allusions to Vietnam can simultaneously be read as parallels to Iraq (and Afghanistan). Indeed, the methods of combat used by the Woads in the film reflect the guerrilla tactics common to depictions of Vietnam: which could equally be analogous to urban warfare in Iraq and guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan.[66] For example, as Arthur and his knights travel north they become trapped in a darkened wood by the Woads who move almost unseen through the heavy foliage and employ a range of wooden traps to ensnare them. As with *Alexander*, the depiction of the forest and positioning of the camera within the undergrowth alludes to the depiction of Vietnam in films like *Platoon* (1986). *King Arthur* also depicts a small platoon of soldiers going on a mission behind enemy lines, and their dialogue is typical of the combat film, including conversations about women, what they plan to do after their discharge, what should become of them if they die, and their loyalty to one another.

Where *King Arthur* draws particular parallels to the Vietnam War combat film is in the role of the father figure. Arthur is a soldier-son to an absent Roman father: even his surrogate father figure, Pelagius, is absent and later revealed to be deceased. Arthur is a servant of the higher patriarchal institutions of Rome and the Church, as well as to God. First Rome betrays him by withholding his knights' freedom, and then his Church betrays him by instigating torture and imprisonment in the name of faith (in imagery which also recalls the 'tiger cages' of the Phoenix programme). Arthur comes to realise he has been used by an imperialist system to subjugate a free people and occupy their country. In a final moment of betrayal and abandonment, Lancelot is killed despite Arthur's pleas to God to protect him. As a result of these betrayals, Arthur fulfils the conventional ending of the Roman epic by turning his back on Rome. In so doing, he also rejects the imperialism of the Roman Empire which, if the film is read allegorically, could be a critique of American imperialism in Vietnam, Iraq, and/or Afghanistan.

Fig.3.5: The natives attack the wagon train in *King Arthur*

Furthermore, the film expands its critique of American expansionism beyond the criticisms inherent in the ancient world epic and the Vietnam War combat film. This occurs through the employment of iconography and themes often associated with the western genre. At its most basic level, the film contains allusions to western films: in the opening scenes of the film Lancelot narrates the history of the Sarmatian knights, who are famed for their skills as cavalry. We then see the young Lancelot riding his horse over the large open plains and gently rolling hills of Sarmatia; a land he describes later as containing grass as far as the eye can see. The expansive skies and remote farmstead in a wide landscape devoid of trees is a common visual image in westerns. Lancelot narrates the knights' journey to Britain, where we are introduced to the principal characters fifteen years into their military service. Despite the numerous knights in Arthurian legend, in the film there are only seven survivors. This appears to be a reference to *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) or its source *The Seven Samurai* (1954) – both of which are cited as influences on the film, along with *The Wild Bunch* (1969), in Fuqua's commentary. Arthur, like Yul Brynner's Chris in *The Magnificent Seven*, is a stoic commander who dresses in black who is accompanied by a handsome and humorous companion, Lancelot, who evokes Steve McQueen's Vin. As with the seven cowboys, each of Arthur's knights is identified by a particular persona, weapon, and costume. Indeed, James Coburn's

character in *The Magnificent Seven* is a gifted knife thrower, which Tristan replicates in the tavern scene where he bullseyes his throwing knife in a game. Following the introductory shots of the knights we move to Bishop Germanius' convoy moving through the British terrain, leading to a sequence which again alludes to a western motif as the natives ambush the stagecoach. Fuqua notes in his commentary that his research revealed the ancient Britons would often fight naked, the implication being that he would have been unable to recreate this in a mainstream blockbuster. As such, his costume designer Penny Rose drew on Native American dress to create the Woad costumes, furthering the similarities between the two. Germanius' covered wagon is likewise highly evocative of those seen in westerns, and during the ambush sequence the Woads, like Native Americans, emerge from the trees shouting and firing arrows at the Romans and almost overrun Germanius' convoy until the cavalry arrives in the form of Arthur's magnificent seven.

The second act of the film recalls a common plot device used in westerns, which Jeffrey Richards summarises as: "the lone cavalry patrol despatched into hostile Indian territory to rescue a settler family."[67] In order to undertake this mission, Arthur and his knights must travel into the wilderness where they encounter native Britons. Like the Native American, the Woads move seamlessly through the landscape and natural world. They are, at first, depicted as the "blue demons" that Bors describes to Horton, but as the narrative progresses they shift from the savages of *The Searchers* to the sympathetic victims of *Little Big Man* and *Soldier Blue*. They are fighting for freedom, and over the course of Arthur's transformation the film ultimately champions, in Russell's words: "the rights of native peoples to resist non-native invaders."[68] In *King Arthur*, the protagonist is a military man and member of the occupying army supposedly bringing civilisation to the wilderness of Britain. However, his regeneration comes through a series of violent encounters in which he discovers the truths of the Roman occupation and refigures himself to become a Briton, leading their army against the Saxons. This process, in keeping with Slotkin's description of the American archetype, begins when he crosses Hadrian's Wall into 'Indian Country'; he undergoes a regression in which he becomes the naïve pupil who must be taught what the real Christian-Rome is; he distances himself from Roman urbanity in the wilderness; and finally, he emerges as a leader for a morally justified cause and fights for a new society.

Through Arthur's transformation in the wilderness he also learns to harness the natural environment to his advantage, evidenced by the battle on the frozen lake. In this process Arthur is further distanced from the 'civilised' and metropolitan Rome. Slotkin has argued that: "The complete 'American' of the Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege".[69] We see no grand cities in *King Arthur*, and of the two main stone structures one is Marius' villa, a symbol of Roman corruption and privilege, the other is Hadrian's Wall, a symbol of the frontier and the limitations of Rome's Empire. This is as far as Rome can reach; the limits of its power and achievement.

In their journey north Arthur and his knights are also enacting a *katabatic* narrative. Hadrian's Wall acts as the border which they must cross to enter the 'underworld'; the grey, cold, wet north evokes the atmosphere of the location as described by Holtsmark.[70] The native Britons and Saxons are demonic in their representations, as discussed above, and Guinevere acts as Arthur's *psychopompos* to guide him through his spiritual journey. As with Holtsmark's definition of the *katabasis* narrative, Arthur is accompanied by his knights into the underworld, but Dagonet is killed during the battle on the ice so not all return. Finally, Arthur and his knights emerge from the underworld with newfound understanding of Rome and its influence.

Fig.3.6: Arthur and Guinevere marry, with Arthur becoming a Briton in *King Arthur*

The knowledge Arthur receives is the realisation that subjugating a people as part of an imperialist enterprise is unjust. Condemnation of imperialism is a recurrent trope of the Roman epic, wherein the imperial powers are conventionally associated with European empires. However, the various allusions in the film to Vietnam and Franzoni's statements that he intended the film as an allegory for the war provides credence to an argument that Rome in *King Arthur* is an allegory for America. In the landscape of Roman Britain many of the visual tropes that conventionally create parallels between America and Rome are absent, and thus the film adopts the frontier myth of the western to relate the depiction of Rome to America. Within this, Arthur becomes the archetypal western hero. Upon returning to civilisation, however, he finds it is corrupt, at which point the film restores the conventional ending of the Roman epic in which Rome – in this case, America – is rejected by the protagonist as he sides with the 'disenfranchised group'. This symbolic act condemns the imperialism of American 'civilisation' and encourages sympathy for the colonialized.

Although initially inspired by the Vietnam War, the film's depiction of corrupt Christians occupying a less economically developed country populated by those belonging to a different religion, and enacting the directives of an institutional, patriarchal core (Rome/the Pope) proved timely for the film's 2004 release. However, the film's production pre-dates the revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, and its cast and crew were not vocal about promoting a contemporary message to the film. Furthermore, the film's criticisms of imperialism were rarely discussed in UK or US reviews and allegorical or analogous readings are few and far between. This may be because audiences were expecting a film which reiterated the King Arthur legend they were familiar with, or else expected an upbeat summer blockbuster from Jerry Bruckheimer. Instead, the film's tone, aesthetic, and treatment of the Arthurian legend were explored in greater detail by the UK and US media. As such, there was little to direct audiences towards contemporary parallels to Iraq or Afghanistan, but the film's allusions to the Vietnam War could, if desired, be applied to the contemporary conflicts to create allegorical or analogous readings of the film, or else show how the more recent conflicts could be regarded as repeating the earlier.

CENTURION *Centurion* is similar to *King Arthur* in many ways. The film continues writer-director Neil Marshall's trope of depicting a small group of characters caught in a dangerous environment and hunted by a hostile force, as previously seen in *Dog Soldiers* (2002), *The Descent* (2005) and *Doomsday* (2008). The latter of these even features a narrative involving a platoon of soldiers sent north of a reconstructed Hadrian's Wall with bloody results: almost identical to the basic premise of *Centurion*. Set prior to *King Arthur* in 117 AD, *Centurion* follows Quintus Dias, a Roman soldier in Britain who is taken prisoner when his frontier fort is sacked by the Picts. Quintus escapes torture and captivity to be saved by General Virilus and the Ninth Legion, who are marching north into Caledonia to destroy the Picts and their king, Gorlacon. However, the legion is led into an ambush by a Pict scout, Etain, and massacred. In the aftermath, a small band of survivors led by Quintus attempt to make their way back to Roman lines with Etain and her riders in pursuit. The survivors find momentary refuge in the home of an outcast Briton, Arianne, who offers them food and shelter. Soon after, the Romans confront their pursuers in an abandoned fort and kill them. Quintus alone makes it back to Roman-occupied territory where he finds Hadrian's Wall under construction. His superiors then order him to be killed to cover-up the embarrassment of the Ninth Legion's destruction, but he escapes and, rejecting Rome, returns to Arianne to begin a new life.

As with *King Arthur*, *Centurion* incorporates elements of both the combat film and the western into the Roman epic. Syntactic elements of the latter remain, most significantly the protagonist turning his back on Rome to find salvation with a woman belonging to a disenfranchised group. However, the depiction of conflict between the Roman army and the native Britons evokes imagery from the Vietnam War combat film although, as *Centurion* was released six years after the invasion and initial occupation of Iraq, these allusions could equally be attributed to the more recent conflict. This parallel has been drawn by Kevin J. Harty, who states that: "Had it been made in the 1960s or 1970s, *Centurion* might easily be seen as a protest against American involvement in Southeast Asia. In 2010, it seems rather easy to read the film in part as a response to Desert Storm and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."[71] Harty's analysis emerged as I was writing up my own findings, and while we both acknowledge Rome's empire building and the harsh terrain of Britain as parallels between the film and modern historical conflicts, Harty does not support his

statements by analysis of the film's production history, or its relationship to the current cycle of ancient world epics or that of the 1950s-60s. Furthermore, he makes no reference to the film's hybridisation of the ancient world epic with the western and combat film, as I explore below.

Similar to *King Arthur*, sequences of combat in *Centurion* could be read as analogous to the wars in Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan. For example, the scene in which the Ninth Legion is ambushed in a forest is evocative of similar ambush sequences in Vietnam and Iraq War films (and, obviously, the conflicts themselves). The legion marches along in a convoy-like column until trees are felled to block the road and trap them (the same tactic also occurs in *The Viking Queen*). Flaming balls are then rolled into the Roman ranks, throwing men back as they are engulfed in flames. This sequence could be regarded as an allusion to the use of IEDs to target vehicle convoys in Iraq and Afghanistan, or alternately to the use of traps and trip-wired explosives in the jungles of Vietnam. Alternately, the use of the fireballs could also be an allusion to *Troy*, in which the device is used by Hector to attack the Greek ships, or even to the climactic battle from *Spartacus* (1960), in which the slave army roll burning cylinders towards the advancing Romans. The range of potential sources upon which *Centurion* may be drawing is emblematic of the difficulties in interpreting these films definitively. Similarly, as with *King Arthur*'s Woads, *Centurion*'s depiction of the Picts could be read as analogous to the Vietcong, the insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan or, as will be discussed, Native Americans in the western. They operate in unity with the natural world and their surroundings, while for the Romans the terrain is inhospitable and dangerous.

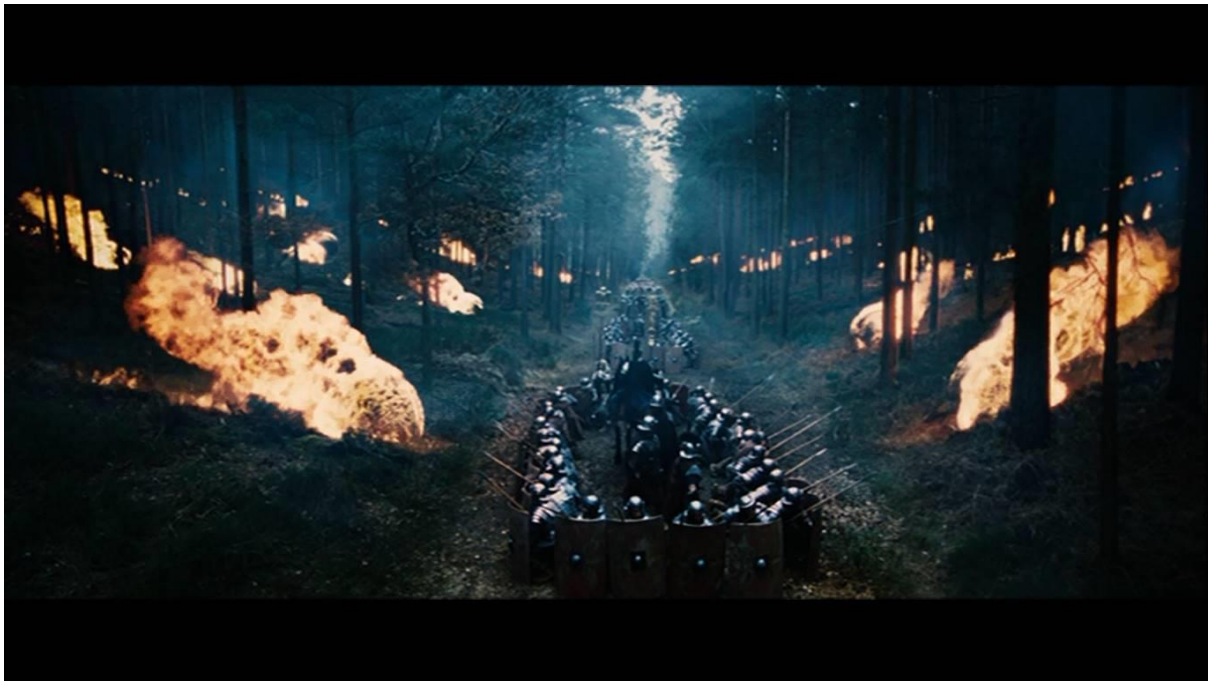

Fig.3.7: The Ninth Legion are ambushed in *Centurion*

Quintus' narration early in the film heightens the parallels between his war and those occurring when *Centurion* was released, as he refers to the Picts' use of guerrilla tactics and utilising "the landscape to their advantage" to turn the Roman invasion into a stalemate. He concludes: "This is a new kind of war, a war without honour, a war without end." Roger Ebert read this description and its delivery as an allusion to US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan recording video diaries, in which they describe the hostile conditions they face.[72] Quintus' description of the campaign is evocative of how the 2003 invasion of Iraq developed into a prolonged occupation. Charlotte Higgins, though, reads *Centurion*'s narrative as being closer to the situation in Afghanistan, depicting: "a mighty army that has overconfidently set out to defeat an inhospitable, mountains land controlled by bloodthirsty warlords."[73] Again, we see that the simplicity of *Centurion*'s narrative and the employment of motifs and imagery familiar to combat films and the wars they depict allow the film to be regarded as analogous to multiple scenarios.

Indeed, Marshall's films typically evoke comparisons to combat films, especially those set in Vietnam. For example, *Centurion* resembles *Dog Soldiers*, in which a small squad of British soldiers on training manoeuvres in Scotland are attacked by werewolves. The soldiers are unprepared and unknowledgeable about their enemy,

with characters being killed off until the few survivors make a final stand in a small farmhouse. As with *Centurion*, Marshall wrote and directed *Dog Soldiers*, providing his soldiers with crude, sexualised dialogue as they joke and mock each other, including frequent use of strong language. The Roman soldiers in *Centurion* continue the linguistic paradigm of the 1950s-60s cycle in that the Romans speak with British accents, although only Quintus and Virilus come close to resembling the Received Pronunciation of most Hollywood Romans. Instead, the film's dialogue is closer to a British combat film, in which Quintus and Virilus are the officers, and the rank and file speak in the uncouth parlance of the 'squaddie', such as those in *Dog Soldiers*. In so doing, Marshall evokes the contemporary British army in his depiction of ancient soldiery. Anthony Lane was supportive of Marshall's incorporation of these unconventional additions to the epic mould, describing the film as possessing: "a resigned bitterness, hard to shake off, that feels right for the experience of tough guys, from whatever period of history, who find themselves at the tattered edge of what they take to be civilization."[74]

Lane's recognition of the characters in *Centurion* being "tough guys" is fitting, as the film makes a greater spectacle of the male form enduring pain than the epics thus far discussed. Although it pales in comparison to the punishment metered out to Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*, the subject of the next chapter, *Centurion* includes brief scenes of torture and prisoner abuse, which could be regarded as allusions to the torture debate within the War on Terror. Both Quintus and Virilus lose their shirts when captured by the Picts, seemingly to humiliate them and heighten their vulnerability in the bitter cold. As with some of the aforementioned methods of torture and the intentions behind them, this is a symbolic action designed to strip the prisoners of their identity: a convention of the Roman epic has been to depict soldiers in armour in order to "provide a reassuring image of the invulnerable male body to compensate for the exposed, vulnerable body of the oppressed hero."[75] *Gladiator* exemplified this, in that Maximus is introduced to us in layers of fur and armour, but as his status and identity as a Roman general is destroyed he loses the furs and cloaks, then his armour, and is at his lowest point when he and the other gladiators stand before their new owner, Proximo, clad only in a loin cloth. From here, Maximus rebuilds his identity by increasing the amount of armour he wears with each successive victory until eventually he customises his breastplate with

images specific to his former life and his family. In *Centurion*, the men are stripped of their armour, whereupon Quintus is cut, and his head forced into a barrel of water into which Gorlacon has urinated. For Virilus, whose name suggests masculine sexual prowess, his humiliation is absolute when he is pitted in a duel against Etain, who slashes his exposed chest before stabbing him with her spear as he kneels before her.

Fig.3.8: Quintus is tortured by the Picts in *Centurion*

This is a symbolic act of penetration as revenge for the sexual violence inflicted upon Etain by Roman soldiers when she was a child: Roman soldiers raped her, cut out her tongue, and committed acts of violence towards her family. This may be an allusion to the 2006 rape and murder of an Iraqi teen, Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi, perpetrated by US soldiers who also murdered her family, in Mahmudiya, Iraq.[76] These events formed the basis of Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007), which is a fictionalised recreation of the events, and itself recalls De Palma's *Casualties of War* (1989), which depicts the rape of a native woman by US soldiers during the Vietnam War. In repeating a similar narrative, De Palma suggests a parallel between the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq. Both films exemplify the aforementioned repetitious use of the absent father figure, the victimisation of the soldiers from PTSD, and the soldiers' immoral behaviour following their abandonment by their military superiors. Indeed, in the Mahmudiya case the lead perpetrator of the crime, Steven Green, reportedly blamed his actions on stress developed during his tour of duty and a lack of "sufficient Army leadership."[77]

The Mahmudiya case, *Redacted*, and *Casualties of War*, share similarities with Etain's story, in which her abuse is symbolic of violence and subjugation derived from military occupation and imperialism. It also subverts the expectation that the

natives are ‘savages’ compared to the ‘civilised’ invaders. The US soldiers in the Mahmudiya case attempted to cover up their crime, initially blaming it on insurgents.[78] *Redacted* explores this aspect further, depicting the attempted cover up as running through various levels in the chain of command. In *Centurion* Etain’s mutilation renders her unable to speak, which could be interpreted as a metaphor for ‘silencing’ the crime committed against her. In providing Etain with this particular backstory, Marshall creates a possible allusion to the Iraq war.

However, in a wider context Etain’s muteness also becomes symbolic of oppressed, disenfranchised groups who are unable to be heard above the ruling imperialistic power. Despite their apparent brutality, *Centurion*’s Picts are not presented wholly unsympathetically. As with *King Arthur*, we come to understand the brutality inflicted upon them during the Roman occupation of Britain. They are the resistance, fighting for freedom. Etain becomes a skilled hunter and tracker, and seems unaffected by the cold or the environment, she can read the landscape and rocks, and is at one with the natural world. Quintus, Virilus and Agricola all compare her to a wolf, and occasionally call her ‘she wolf’. Indeed, when the survivors get separated, one group is pursued by Etain while the others are literally hunted by wolves. Both she and the wolves inhabit, and are extensions of, the wilderness. In this respect, she evokes the western mythology of the native/savage, and is one of numerous signs of the influence of westerns on *Centurion*.

Discussing the film’s relationship to genre, Marshall states that: “At no point did we ever think we were making an epic…I always saw it as being a much more kind of intimate story based on these guys fighting for survival in a vast landscape.”[79] The concept of ‘epic’, as in the Introduction, is not an easy term to define and Marshall’s exact meaning in denying *Centurion*’s inclusion in that designation is unknown. He goes on in the same interview to say that he regards epics as featuring thousands of extras and sweeping shots of deserts. Nevertheless, while his film was a relatively low-budget production, it utilises extras and CGI to create the appearance of many hundreds – if not thousands – of men in the Ninth Legion as it marches north and is attacked, and his depiction of the landscape emphasises its size and grandeur with multiple sweeping helicopter shots. However, Marshall has repeatedly cited westerns as an influence on *Centurion*, stating in one interview that: “My film is actually more

akin to a Western than anything…I was hugely inspired by *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* [1969] when they're on the run and things like that, and the cavalry movies of John Ford - *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* [1949], that kind of thing."[80]

Critics similarly identified the influence of the western on the film, such as John DeFore noting that the narrative unfolds "like a Roman-era Western in its depiction of a few soldiers trying to get home alive after the slaughter of their comrades."[81] Roger Ebert noted a visual allusion to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* when the Romans leap from a cliff into a river to avoid Etain's "posse".[82] Similarly, the introduction of Virilus is a sequence that could easily be translated into a western, as the general is seen arm wrestling another man in a barn or tavern until a disagreement breaks out and the scene dissolves into a room-wide drunken brawl. The scene evokes the typical saloon-bar fight from westerns, as seen in Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* (1962) and Anthony Mann's *Bend of the River*, as well as *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* and *The Searchers*. As with *King Arthur*, *Centurion* alerts the viewer of the western's influence on the film through a series of allusions to western films. The informed viewer should therefore recognise how the syntactic elements of the western begin to interact with those of the ancient world epic.

This is evident in how the film portrays landscape. The ancient world epic has at times used landscape to great effect, but more commonly creates spectacle from urban environments. When the natural landscape is utilised, as Theodorakopoulos explains: "the human figure never dominates…[they] must always appear as a tiny part of a much bigger context."[83] However, this is also common in the western genre, which uses landscape to a far greater extent not only in the creation of spectacle but also in the development of characterisation. Furthermore, the landscape in the western is frequently depicted as a symbolic entity that demarcates the worlds of civilisation and wilderness. The liminal space in which these two worlds meet is the frontier which, as we saw above, is a mythic space in the construction of the American western. In *Centurion*'s opening scenes we are alerted to the fact that this vision of Rome is not the 'civilisation' and urban sprawl of many previous epics, but a film about the frontier experience. This is indicated to the audience most prominently during a flashback sequence to Quintus' capture by the Picts soon after his

introduction, where the camera locates his isolated form running half-naked through the snow on a mountainside. His voice-over narration informs us that this moment “is neither the beginning nor the end of my story.” The scene then cuts to an establishing shot of a wooden fort at night. A caption tells us that this is Inch-Tuth-Il, the “Most Northerly Garrison on the Frontier” (which historically it was). The term ‘frontier’ is immediately evocative of the American frontier, the frontiersmen, and the mythic world surrounding them. Quintus’ narration then establishes the world he inhabits through a brief monologue:

> Two years on the frontier. This place is the arsehole of the world. Even the land wants us dead. The longer we stay, the deeper the cold and damp soaks into our bones and the rain makes way only for the stinging bite of the north wind. While we lose brave men to foot-rot and frost-bite, the Pict king Gorlacon sends his war parties to raid along the frontier.

The repeated use of ‘frontier’ and the reference to ‘war parties’ evoke the lexicon of the American West and Native Americans. Even the fort itself bears a similarity to the wooden-palisaded fort in *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon*. During the Pict attack Quintus is almost killed, but he is spared for interrogation because he speaks Pictish. As noted above, the archetypal western hero is one who can serve as interpreter between the native, the wilderness, and civilisation.

Fig.3.9: Landscape in *Centurion*

The wilderness itself is shot in a manner that evokes Anthony Mann, a director whose works include both westerns and ancient world epics. His entries in the latter genre are notable for their use of landscape, including the opening quarry scenes in *Spartacus*, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* which features a lengthy first act set on the Roman frontier in Germania. Mann favoured location shooting to capture the brutal reality of a landscape, leading Kitses to state that:

> the hallmark of Mann's style is its physical intensity, its brutal, mineral, ground-level point of view, and its vividly concrete treatment of space. Spectacular, these images can also be said to be literally sensational, jarring the jaded viewer with direct physical and kinetic experience.[84]

In *Centurion*, once the survivors begin their flight the film depicts their remoteness and isolation with the epic grandeur of the landscape. Ebert describes how these sequences are:

> photographed principally in long shots (aerial shots, crane shots, distant tracking shots, creeping-up-over-ridges shots, stately establishing shots with views that go on for miles), so that the characters are reduced to tiny, faceless figures scrabbling across the wide-screen landscape until they disappear into it.[85]

These shots are intercut with medium shots and close ups revealing the harsh realities of the landscape: the uneven terrain, the cold, the lack of food, and the physical exhaustion the men are suffering traversing it. Marshall explains: "The weather, the landscape, had to be an important character within the piece, because that's trying to kill them as much as anything else."[86] *Empire*'s Dan Jolin reiterates this in his review, calling Caledonia "the movie's most impressive antagonist."[87] As with *King Arthur*'s Woads, Etain and her Pict warriors are synonymous with the wilderness, and evocative of the native/savage character from westerns in their use of face paint, fire, horsemanship, and integration with the landscape.

In depicting the Roman frontier in this way, Marshall subverts the typical Roman epic by deconstructing the image of the Roman Empire. The Technicolor pageantry of the 1950s-60s cycle and the immense buildings and impressive architecture of Roman cities are nowhere to be seen. One of the few stone structures witnessed in the film is the foundations of Hadrian's Wall; a symbol of the limitations of Rome's empire following a failed attempt to expand. The film's portrayal of frontier life is not the Promethean ideal of bringing civilisation to the wilderness; instead, the frontier is cold, dark, cruel, and violent. The viewer is left with the question of how Rome's

occupation of this territory contributes to the glory of its empire. Quintus, as with most Roman epics, begins the narrative as part of the Roman system until – similar to Arthur – he undergoes a *katabatic* narrative. He is introduced to us crossing a mountain range, one of the possible boundary markers Holstmark lists in his definition of the narrative tropes. The 'underworld' of Caledonia is suitably cold, dark and damp, Etain – the 'she wolf' – and her riders are the bestial adversaries he and his company must face, and only Quintus makes it out of the underworld alive. Although Etain herself, under the guise of helping the Romans, initially fulfils the *psychopompus* role, this transfers to Arianne part way through the film. Finally, Quintus emerges from his experience – crossing back to 'civilisation' when he reaches Hadrian's Wall – with newfound knowledge about the brutality of Roman imperialism. However, when the Romans attempt to have him executed his reinvention as both the archetypal western hero and as the informed survivor of the *katabasis* is complete. He understands that Rome is corrupt and dangerous, with no regard for his life. As with most Roman epics, he rejects Rome and what it symbolises, returning to the wilderness (like Edwards in *The Searchers*) to be with Arianne.

In Quintus' rejection of Rome we also return to the combat film. The Ninth Legion is ordered into hostile territory against a guerrilla force by a powerful patriarchal empire. Once in the wilderness, they are abandoned by them and, in Quintus' case, later betrayed. Quintus is himself an abandoned soldier-son, as he occasionally references the lessons that his (unseen) father taught him: lessons that Gorlacon repeats almost verbatim to his own son in Pictish in a subtle nuance to the universality of war and paternal relationships. Furthermore, Quintus' father was a gladiator who earned his freedom – a possible allusion to *Centurion*'s cinematic father, *Gladiator*: Proximo, a surrogate father for Maximus, tells him how he cultivated his popularity as a gladiator and won his freedom. As well as occasional lines of dialogue, the overall aesthetic of Marshall's film is indebted to the opening Germania sequence of *Gladiator*, in that both are dominated by wintry landscapes, forests, grey skies, mist and smoke, and shades of blue punctuated by injections of fire and blood. Both films also see their protagonists utilising lessons their father(-figure)s teach them to survive and achieve their aims, and in so doing they embody elements of the father figure trope from the combat films of the 1990s and early

2000s. Nevertheless, Quintus is ultimately betrayed by Rome, repeating the trope common among many Iraq and Vietnam combat films.

Fig.3.10: Hadrian's Wall under construction in *Centurion*

Charlotte Higgins, who views the film as a western in Roman guise, believes that its: "ancient setting can enable a narrative to tackle ideas that might be uncomfortable if placed closer to home."[88] This potentially includes conventional westerns, as Marshall has expressed fears that cavalry films such as those by John Ford could be construed as politically incorrect if made in a similar vein today.[89] Higgins' suggestion, however, is that *Centurion*'s historical setting enables it to engage with American history, including contemporary events, through allegory and analogy. Her use of the term "uncomfortable" is interesting, as it may refer to the apparent audience distaste for Iraq and Afghanistan War films in the period leading up to *Centurion*'s release. The films referenced in this thesis as reiterating the themes and motifs of the 1980s Vietnam War films were repeatedly unsuccessful at the global box office, but especially in the US. The genre was even dubbed "toxic" by Martin Barker and "box office poison" by Everhart.[90] If Marshall intended to create a film which criticised the Iraq or Afghanistan Wars, especially the American role in those conflicts, confronting the topic directly was unlikely to attract audiences. As such, the analogous world of Rome and ancient Britain was a potentially 'usable past'.

However, *Centurion*'s simple narrative – a story of men on the run – could be transferred to a vast range of conflicts, settings, or periods. Indeed, Leslie Felperin has commented that the film: "never quite evokes a sense of antiquity; its core plot could be happening at any time."[91] I disagree with Felperin's assessment that the film fails to evoke the ancient world, as many of the semantic features of the Roman epic are present in the costume design, armour, set dressings and scenes of warfare. Where Felperin may be justified is that *Centurion*'s plot could indeed be happening at any time. The film effectively creates an atmosphere of the harsh realities of frontier life for the Roman soldier in Britain, but in its depiction of the frontier, the native Britons, allusions to western films, plot, and use of landscape, it could also be regarded as an analogy for the American experience on its own frontier as the nation expanded west. Yet further, the film's depiction of the Picts, the terrain, the betrayal of the soldiery by their patriarchal institutions, and the squad motif, the film could be interpreted as an analogy for Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, or even other conflicts. The details do not infer one specific reading.

Quintus' narration influences the way we interpret *Centurion*'s analogous potential. Whereas Odysseus, Ptolemy and Dilios romanticised their subjects, and appeared concerned with memorialising events so that they will be remembered in the future, Quintus' narration is very much in its present. We are told in the film's opening sequence that "this is neither the beginning, nor the end of my story", which he reiterates at the close of the film. He is not attempting to memorialise his experience, and his description of the frontier cited above does not attempt to romanticise the location. There is bitterness, anger, and immediacy to Quintus' narration that is not present in the Greek epics, and as such its message feels contemporary and relevant: like the videos made by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Marshall's use of English voices and coarse dialogue among the men evokes contemporary British soldiers in particular, but his hybridisation of the quintessential American genre, the western, with the ancient world epic likewise allows Rome to be associated with the US. In the absence of the visual iconography of Rome, the cues to the western enable these parallels to be drawn.

While *Centurion*'s analogous intentions are ultimately debatable, it is unquestionably an allegory for the violence inherent in imperialist expansion. The unrelentingly bleak

and violent portrayal of the frontier in the film encourages the viewer to question the value in Rome's attempts to expand its empire. In the character of Etain, we learn of the violence perpetrated by imperial powers in subduing and occupying a foreign country, and while at times she is cruel, we come to understand why she and the Picts resist Roman rule. Rome itself, embodied by the administrative officials Quintus encounters at the end of his ordeal, reveal the corrupt governance and disregard for human life at the heart of imperialism, and ultimately the film's sympathies lay with the abandoned soldier-son who attempted to do his duty but was forsaken. Quintus' rejection of 'civilisation' embodies the final condemnation of imperialist society, and his return to the wilderness is symbolic of a return to a simpler, individualist existence. Although this allegorical message can be applied to contemporary events, at its heart the message is universal in the same way 'freedom' is for *300*.

THE EAGLE *The Eagle* reiterates a variety of features seen in *King Arthur* and *Centurion*. Following the success of *Gladiator* and renewed studio interest in the ancient world epic, the rights to Rosemary Sutcliff's source novel were acquired by producer Duncan Kenworthy. According to eventual director Kevin MacDonald, Kenworthy initially intended to film *The Eagle* as a "big studio movie", but reconsidered his ambitions following the commercial disappointments of *Troy* and *Alexander*.[92] While promoting the film, though, Kenworthy stated that: "*Troy* and *Alexander* were the kind of films I ***didn't*** want it to resemble – big, grandiose, lots of CGI…At its heart, the story is just two guys in the wilds of Scotland."[93] As such, Kenworthy handed the directorship to MacDonald, whose background in documentary filmmaking and desire to shoot *The Eagle* utilising *cinéma vérité* techniques – such as hand-held cameras and location shoots with a small crew – suited the more intimate and visceral scope of the picture. Although the finished film received average-to-poor reviews and was not a financial success, it did subvert the norm of the current cycle of ancient world epics by reportedly faring better at the US box office than it did internationally.

The Eagle is based on the 1954 young person's novel *The Eagle of the Ninth*, which was previously adapted into a BBC miniseries in the 1970s. Both book and series were produced prior to the disproval of the theory about the legion's massacre, but

The Eagle reiterates the story nonetheless. The film follows Marcus Aquila, a young officer in the Roman military promoted to the command of a small fort in southern Britain (although not named in the film, in the book it is Exeter). The son of a centurion in the Ninth Legion, Marcus is haunted by his father's disappearance twenty years earlier. In losing the legion's eagle standard – a symbol of Roman power – in the massacre of the Ninth, Marcus' family honour was lost along with his father. Wounded in battle during a local uprising and subsequently discharged from military service, Marcus then saves the life of a Briton, Esca, due to die in the local gladiatorial arena. Marcus' uncle, Aquila, purchases Esca to be his nephew's personal slave, and the two younger men then ride north of Hadrian's Wall in search of the eagle. Through their fractious and tense relationship Marcus gains a new perspective on Rome as an Imperial power and the brutal realities of occupation by a foreign army; an experience which cost Esca his family. Eventually the men find that the eagle has become a ceremonial prop for a tribe known as the Seal people, and stealing it they hurry back to Hadrian's Wall. Eventually trapped and injured, the men are saved by the aged survivors of the Ninth Legion in a short, bloody skirmish with the Seal people. Although Marcus returns the eagle to his Roman superiors and regains his family's honour, he too turns his back on Rome for a life in Britain with a now-free Esca.

Although Roman epics, including *King Arthur* and *Centurion*, typically depict the male protagonist allying himself to the disenfranchised group through a romantic relationship with a female, in *The Eagle* the latter role is fulfilled by Esca. Like Guinevere and Arianne, he creates the sense of guilt in Marcus that disrupts his Roman hubris and forces him to reconsider his identity as a soldier for an occupying army which serves an imperialist power. Marcus only achieves his aim of finding the eagle because of Esca's local knowledge, fighting skills, and quick thinking. For example, when the men are captured by the Seal people he convinces them that Marcus is *his* slave and in so doing saves his life. Similarly, Arthur succeeds because Guinevere and Merlin's army supports him at Baden Hill, and Arianne saves Quintus and his companions by healing their wounds, offering them food, shelter, and deterring Etain and her riders when they come searching. In replacing this typically female role with another male character, *The Observer*'s Philip French interpreted the narrative as containing "a certain unobtrusive homoerotic aspect to

the relationship."[94] *The Daily Mail*'s Chris Tookey, on the other hand, regarded it as less than unobtrusive and summarised the film as "Ancient Rome as reinterpreted by the makers of *Brokeback Mountain* [2005] but with all the explicitly gay sex taken out."[95] The latter is a rather basic, uninspired reading of a friendship between two men. MacDonald depicts the bond between Marcus and Esca as a close homosocial relationship formed through the co-dependent endurance of hardships, essentially replicating the 'band of brothers' trope of combat films rather than the homoerotic reading suggested by Tookey.

Fig.3.11: Esca (foreground) and Marcus endure hardships in the hostile Scottish terrain in *The Eagle*

MacDonald's depiction of this relationship is the primary difference between the film adaptation and the source novel (the TV series stays remarkably close to Sutcliff's text). In the novel, Esca immediately becomes Marcus' loyal and selfless servant once he is bought from the arena. In *The Eagle*, however, Esca is angered by his enslavement and fractious towards Marcus, who in turn does not always trust him. Esca in the film is also the son of the chieftain of the Brigantes tribe, who participated in the massacre of the Ninth Legion and therefore the death of Marcus' father. It is therefore feasible that there would be tension between the two characters, and this alteration creates a new dynamic to their relationship in that it grows and develops rather than remaining a static feature as in the novel. MacDonald has argued that the

change is also inspired by an analogous factor. In one interview, he compared the book's presentation of the relationship to that of 1950s America, suggesting that during that period it was common for people to have servants and therefore the master/servant dynamic between Marcus and Esca was relatable to readers. However, he progresses to discuss the inspiration for *The Eagle*'s revision of this dynamic:

> with the idea of someone being from a country that has been occupied, our references immediately go to Iraq or Afghanistan. They [the occupied nation] feel resentment and, like, can we trust these people? The idea that they don't want to have our culture thrust upon them and how do they feel about us being there and occupying their country.[96]

In this regard MacDonald is promoting an analogous reading of the film. Unlike Petersen, Stone and Snyder, he suggests the parallels are intentional and not coincidental. In this respect, *The Eagle* is a rare example in this thesis of a filmmaker directly citing contemporary events as an active influence on the formation of the film. Furthermore, MacDonald has expanded on Marcus' initial attitude towards Esca and the Roman occupiers' treatment of the Britons as reflecting: "the sense of bigotry that some Americans have, and of a single-minded belief in their own culture and the greatness that's America."[97] MacDonald not only identifies contemporary relevance in the occupation motif, but also draws a specific parallel between the film's depiction of Rome and America.

This is also evident in the casting and dialogue, as *The Eagle* subverts the linguistic paradigm of most Roman epics by having the Roman characters speak with American accents. Similar to Snyder and his Spartans, MacDonald has said that he regarded the Romans in the film as the equivalent of modern day US Marines, which is further evidenced by their dialogue which includes American military parlance, such as "latrines" in the camp.[98] Although this analogous use of accents was lost on Scott Bowles of *USA Today*, who claimed the film is "over-Americanized", Philip French and Sheri Linden identified the US accents as equating Roman imperialism with that of America.[99] Macdonald has defended his decision, explaining:

> To me it makes more sense in every way … When you look at any classical Hollywood film from the 1930s onwards, Brits are always playing the Romans. It was easy to understand. Britain had an empire. Britain was the ex-colonial power. But Americans are the superpower of the world now. America is the empire. They're the dominant occupying power in Iraq and Afghanistan.[100]

MacDonald has been slightly contradictory in what his intentions in associating Rome and America were. In one interview he states that: “I’m not trying to make a big political point, I’m just trying to update the convention.”[101] However, he is quoted elsewhere comparing the period in which the film was made to Sutcliff’s, arguing that she: “was writing at the end of the British empire. In our time, you can rationalise the story as being about the end of the American empire.”[102] In this instance he is directly associating the film with American imperialism, and the film provides ample evidence to support this argument. It features numerous instances which could be regarded as allusions to the current conflicts, as well as narrative motifs similar to those discussed in relation to *King Arthur* and *Centurion*. Furthermore, the film hybridises elements of the ancient world epic with those of the western to evoke the feel of frontier life, American expansionism, and to compensate for the lack of conventional urban imagery that typically parallels Roman and American society.

Fig.3.12: Hadrian’s Wall in *The Eagle*

As noted, the use of accents and terminology initially alludes to contemporary US servicemen and women in the early scenes in which Marcus arrives at the fort. It then comes under attack by British natives who wish to oust the Romans from their country. They are led by a religious leader, a druid, who conducts a public execution by decapitating a captured Roman soldier. This event, which does not originate in

Sutcliff's novel, is potentially an allusion to beheading videos filmed and posted online by terrorist networks during the War on Terror. This began with the beheading of the Wall Street Journal writer Daniel Pearl by Pakistani terrorists in 2002, and continued with subsequent beheadings in 2004.[103] The terrorists responsible for the beheading of Associated Press journalist Nick Berg in Iraq reportedly cited the abuse of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib as the reason for their act of retaliatory violence.[104] In *The Eagle* the druid calls on his gods before announcing to Marcus and his men that they have "stolen our lands and killed our sons…you have defiled our daughters…I curse you!" He proceeds to decapitate the Roman prisoner as an act of retaliatory violence and a gesture of defiance to the occupying army.

The relationship between Marcus and Esca is predicated on the inherent tension between their respective roles as the occupying soldier and indigenous person. While they initially have trust issues, they help each other to overcome attacks by guerrilla-like tribesmen, capture by the Seal people (with very brief allusions to prisoner abuse), and the hostile environment of Scotland. Again, the Seal people (and other tribes depicted) can be equated with insurgents or the Vietcong through their ability to move fast across difficult terrain, conceal themselves in the natural world, and utilise ambushes to attack Marcus and Esca (as well as massacring the Ninth Legion). Carrie Rickey has compared the film's scenes of conflict and the Roman occupation of Britain to that of Afghanistan and Vietnam.[105] Similarly, Sukhdev Sandhu wrote of *The Eagle*:

> It's hard not to believe that Macdonald wasn't thinking about the last decade's disasters in Afghanistan when he was making this film: there, too, you had forces from the modern imperium, forces who were meant to be savvy and high-tech, thinking they could enter a famously proud and inhospitable environment in pursuit of a fabled prize.[106]

While contemporary analogies are obvious, in repeating this motif the film is essentially replaying the myth of the frontier. In their use of guerrilla tactics, harmonious interaction with the landscape (compared to Marcus' struggles) and, in the case of the Seal people, their visual appearance, the indigenous Britons evoke the conventional depiction of the Native Americans in western films. Again, as with *King Arthur* and *Centurion*, while the natives north of Hadrian's Wall pose a violent threat to Marcus they are not portrayed wholly unsympathetically. Marcus befriends a young boy in the Seal people, and in killing their lead warrior in the final fight he expresses emotion over the young man's death. Foremost, though, is Marcus'

relationship with Esca, as through learning of his family's death at the hands of Romans and subsequently being saved by Esca while on their quest for the eagle, Marcus develops love, respect and gratitude towards the Briton. Marcus returns the eagle to Roman hands but rejects continued association with the army in favour of a new life in Britain with Esca. He, like Quintus, Arthur, and *The Searchers*' Edwards, essentially reject 'civilisation' for the wilderness and become the archetypal American western hero. Indeed, the final shot of *The Eagle* alludes to Ford's film, as the camera is positioned inside a room looking out towards an open doorway as Marcus and Esca head outside.

Macdonald has cited *The Searchers* along with *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* as informing *The Eagle*, as well as discussing the allegorical and analogous uses of the genre in films such as *Ulzana's Raid* (1972).[107] He states:

> I suppose that the Western has always been a kind of mold to which you could pour the concerns of the day, but have them seen in the simple terms of the Western … That's really what this [*The Eagle*] is, a Western set in Scotland.[108]

Various critics recognised this connection, including Philip French (who has authored a book on the western) who states in his review that:

> This first chapter is like a western in which a charismatic martinet gains the reluctant admiration of his troops by restoring their self-respect and courageously leading them in battle against hostile natives. One thinks especially of Raoul Walsh's *They Died With Their Boots On* [1941], where Colonel Custer takes command of a dispirited US Seventh Cavalry, and in fact *The Eagle* ends up echoing Custer's Last Stand and the contest for the regimental flag.[109]

Fig.3.13: The Seal people in *The Eagle*

A.O. Scott, writing for *USA Today*, remarked that *The Eagle* "plays less like a 1950s Technicolor sword-and-sandal epic than like a western of the same era, but with foggier visuals and skimpier political and sexual subtext."[110] Scott criticised the film for what he saw as its excessive focus on the savage nature of the Native Britons, and argues that the film ultimately lacked the western's ability to "mine the psychological and ideological complexities of conquest and territorial struggle." Yet, while the depiction of the native Britons, especially the Seal people, certainly embodies Marcus' fear and lack of understanding, his brief friendship with the young boy, his show of sadness at the death of the lead warrior, and his developing relationship with Esca can be said to exhibit another side to the natives that elevates them beyond 'savages'. Furthermore, the film mines the complexities of conquest and territorial struggle through its depiction of Marcus' journey which – unsurprisingly – takes the form of a *katabatic* narrative. Hadrian's Wall again acts as the boundary between civilisation/life and the wilderness/underworld, further emphasised by the journey upriver in the opening scene of the film which could be an allusion to the river Styx or the central journey of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Esca fulfils the role of the *psychopompus*, guiding Marcus through the underworld where the various tribesmen they meet embody the spirits of the dead: especially the Seal people who are largely covered in grey mud or paint which gives them a ghostly, spectral appearance. Marcus also witnesses them perform a ritual dance to primal drumming and their king or chieftain carries the eagle standard while dressed in a bestial costume comprising a cloak made of feathers, a demonic-looking mask, and antlered helmet. The terrain they encounter is increasingly cold, wet, and inhospitable, and is again shot in the style of Anthony Mann's westerns. MacDonald and cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle mix shots which emphasise the grandeur and scale of the scenery and the relative insignificance of Marcus and Esca as they traverse it with low, ground-level shots which reveal the mud, rocks, and the feet of the travellers. Towards the end of their journey Marcus joins with the survivors of the legion and some are killed in the fight against the Seal people, fulfilling the trope of the *katabasis* in which not every member of the company to enter the underworld returns. Finally, the purpose of the expedition is both to retrieve an item (the eagle) and obtain knowledge (what happened to Marcus' father), and both are achieved.

The journey to reclaim the eagle is where *The Eagle* differs slightly from *King Arthur* and *Centurion*. Whereas Arthur and Quintus are sent on missions north, Marcus elects to go of his own free will in order to find the eagle and restore his father's honour. In this respect Marcus' actual father holds a greater symbolic, motivating influence on the narrative than the patriarchal institution of Rome and its military. Indeed, by reclaiming the eagle Marcus initially hopes to be reinstated in the legions following his dismissal due to injury. However, his *katabatic* journey furnishes him with the knowledge and understanding to forsake Rome in favour of life with Esca, fulfilling the ancient world epic's trope of the protagonist turning his back on Rome. In this respect, the film both echoes the Greek mythological films – which *The Eagle* was released contemporaneous to in 2011 – in that Marcus is reconciled with his father, but also reveals him to reject the symbolic father of Rome. This is, to some degree, the same in *King Arthur* and *Centurion*, in that while all three protagonists become abandoned-solider sons who reject patriarchal Rome, but all three exhibit respect and devotion to their actual, biological fathers.

The confluence of elements from the western, the *katabasis* narrative, and the relationship to the father figure combine to reinforce the film's associations between Rome and America. In so doing, it lends credence to MacDonald's suggested interpretation of the film as a reflection of the downfall of the Roman Empire. The various allusions and analogous sequences direct the viewer to identify the similarities between the events depicted and contemporary events, but these are ultimately in the service of a larger allegorical message about American imperialism. The film can be read as a warning about the effects of expansionism, wherein Rome/America's bigoted, hubristic confidence in their cultural superiority blinds them to the realities of their acts in occupying another country and culture. The film depicts Romans enjoying Roman amenities in their villas, but the sites where Rome and Britain meet are those of violence: in combat at the fort or in watching gladiators in the arena. Unlike the 1950s-60s epics which reflected Roman glory with colour, pageantry and images of immense Roman architecture as expressions of their power and glory, the largest stone structure witnessed in *The Eagle* is, again, Hadrian's Wall. The wall acts as a symbol of the limitations of the empire and the Ninth Legion's massacre is a sign of violence and failure in attempting to expand further. To again paraphrase Marcus Aurelius in *Gladiator*: Rome has brought the

sword, nothing more. MacDonald's film omits a number of characters from the book which contradict this message, such as an elite British family – "A British family of the ultra-Roman kind", as they are described in the novel – who have ingratiated themselves into Roman society, learning Latin, wearing Roman dress and adopting Romanised names.[111] By contrast, the film's portrayal of Roman imperialism is as a negative influence on the country. Ultimately, *The Eagle* can be read as a critical comment on American imperialism concealed within a Roman adventure story about cross-cultural friendship.

THE LAST LEGION The final work to consider in this analysis is *The Last Legion*. The film shares a number of features with *King Arthur*, *Centurion* and *The Eagle*, such as its inclusion of Hadrian's Wall, the Ninth Legion, and the origins of Arthurian legend. However, it is arguably an anti-allegorical text that defies clear interpretation. This is not through multi-layered attribution of historical detail, such as in the case of *Alexander*, but rather through the compounding of non-historical, fictional aspects into the story. The film is aimed at young audiences (it was released during the October half-term holiday in the UK), with the trailer promoting the film as a swashbuckling action-adventure containing wizards, a child hero, and the beginning of King Arthur's legend (which is actually a surprise, 'twist' ending in the source novel). The lack of narrative or historical cohesion in its plot and visuals complicates forming a straightforward conclusion, but the film is nevertheless worth exploring for how it depicts the influence of imperialism and the decline of the Roman Empire.

Loosely based on a 2002 novel by Valerio Massimo Manfredi (who co-wrote the screenplay), *The Last Legion*'s narrative has similarities to that of *King Arthur*, as both are inspired by the theory that the legend of Arthur derived from a Roman figure in the Dark Ages. The film opens in 460 AD during the decline of the Roman Empire. Romulus Augustus is declared Emperor at the age of 12, but less than two weeks into his reign Rome is sacked by the Goths, his mother and father killed, and Romulus himself is imprisoned on Capri. There he discovers a sword taken from Britannia by Julius Caesar during his invasions, and is told by his teacher and former native of Britannia, Ambrosinus, that whoever possesses it has the power to rule the nation. Romulus and Ambrosinus are rescued by a former Roman general, Aurelius,

and his small band of soldiers. Pursued by the Goths, the company travel across Gaul to Britannia where they soon arrive at Hadrian's Wall and encounter the commander of the Ninth Legion. The legion has dispersed and integrated into ancient British society, but when the pursuing Goths join forces with the King of Anglia they reform to defeat them in battle. In a brief epilogue set years later, Ambrosinus – now going by his Britannic name of Merlin – concludes his story to Romulus' young son, Arthur. We are told Aurelius and the remnants of the Ninth legion settled in Britain, and Caesar's sword became Excalibur.

Upon its release few critics compared the film to *King Arthur*, instead contrasting it unfavourably to *300* which was released earlier that year.[112] Common criticisms of *The Last Legion* include the fight choreography and editing, script, acting, direction, and its chaotic mix of genres which failed to accumulate into a tonally cohesive whole. *Variety*, for instance, stated that: "Pic is seriously hampered by glaring inconsistencies of tone and intent, and often feels like a series of highlights carved out of a much longer epic", while *Cinema Review* complained it: "tries to fit into several genres and winds up not belonging anywhere…this is probably the worst entry in the genre in recent memory."[113] The issues surrounding tone and genre identity complicate the process of trying to interpret the text and ascertain if it contains any message or meaning. This includes the manner in which the film depicts Roman Britain. Unlike the previous films that were entirely set in Britain, only *The Last Legion*'s final act takes place there. The purpose for the journey is apparently to find the Ninth Legion (the Twelfth Legion, in the novel) to either retake Rome or else to protect Romulus. Once there, the Romans decide to remain in Britain. There is little-to-no reference to the influence or effects of Roman occupation, or that the British people ever resisted Roman rule before the antagonistic King of Anglia, Vortgyn; a figure portrayed as a violent warlord and symbol of tyranny, rather than a freedom fighter.

Unlike the aforementioned films in which Hadrian's Wall is a symbol of the limitations of a corrupt Empire, in *The Last Legion* is it described by Ambrosinus as: "The last fortress of the Empire…A monument of Roman law and order." It is evident that the film's depiction of Rome is not that of a corrupt empire, albeit one that is coming to

an end. Before the final battle, Aurelius delivers the following speech to the surviving members of the Ninth Legion:

> We have fought all our lives for the empire our ancestors created and together we have watched that empire crumble to dust…there is one more battle to be waged: against tyranny, and the slaughter of innocents. Let us defend to the last breath this island of Britannia against those who would tear out its heart and soul, and those that come after will remember that there was such a thing as a Roman soldier, with a Roman sword and a Roman heart!

This speech is a confusion of identities, allegiances and values. Aurelius and his Roman followers are part of an empire that has occupied and controlled Britain for many years in what the other films in this cycle depict as a tyrannical manner, and yet here Rome is defending Britain *against* tyranny. *The Last Legion* ultimately rejects the other films' condemnation of Roman imperialism and praises it as a bastion of freedom. This is unlike the vast majority of Roman epics and counters the typical conclusion of the films in which the protagonist rejects Rome in favour of a disenfranchised group. Here, the Romans become the disenfranchised group themselves, and although the characters remain in Britain they are symbols of Rome and its empire. This reversal of the genre convention could be the result of the film being an Italian production (although one aimed at an English speaking audience), and the filmmakers did not want to portray Italy's history as corrupt. However, as the above scene appears in the film it also evokes the British Empire in Aurelius' impassioned speech about defending Britain (albeit against native Britons) delivered in the Received Pronunciation of star Colin Firth. Conversely, the film appears to make no attempt in its dialogue, visuals or casting to parallel its depiction of Rome to contemporary America. *The Last Legion* is a confusing and contradictory film that differs from most Roman epics in its favourable depiction of Rome, but it appears to reiterate themes significant to its predecessor *King Arthur* in portraying the Roman Empire in decline, Britain as its furthest frontier, and the origins of Arthurian legend emerging from this context.

In contrast to this Italian epic, the Anglo-American productions of *King Arthur*, *Centurion* and *The Eagle* can more readily be interpreted as containing allegorical material which criticises imperialism – and more specifically American imperialism. The films utilise the genre's conventions of associating Rome and America and concluding the narratives with the protagonists turning their back on Rome in favour

of life with the disenfranchised group. In so doing, *King Arthur*, *Centurion* and *The Eagle* suggest an allegorical message of anti-imperialism and sympathy with those under foreign occupation. This message is reinforced through the employment of western tropes including the frontier mythology. This liminal space between civilisation and wilderness becomes the symbolic boundary (handily visualised in the form of Hadrian's Wall) that the heroes must cross to embark on a *katabatic* journey to obtain the knowledge they require to reject Rome and the oppression and violence it symbolises. Despite the British setting and Roman characters, the heroes of these three films become the archetypal hero of the American frontier.

In these films, America's history of expansionism, violence towards indigenous peoples, and the corruptive influence of 'civilisation' are paralleled not only to ancient Rome but to Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. The trope of a force derived from a technologically superior or 'civilised' empire entering a hostile wilderness in which the natives work in tandem with the terrain to defeat the opposition through guerrilla tactics is applicable to any one of these conflicts. Therefore, *King Arthur*, *Centurion* and *The Eagle* can all be read as analogous to Iraq and Afghanistan, but they contain few details which suggest they are specifically about these conflicts. Indeed, in the case of *King Arthur* the filmmakers cited the Vietnam War as their primary analogous influence, while the absent father/abandoned soldier-son motif runs throughout these films, linking them both to the Vietnam and Iraq War combat film cycles. The allusions to westerns across these films similarly suggest the films can be regarded as analogies for America's own imperial history and treatment of indigenous peoples in the West. As such, we should regard these films principally as allegorical texts which depict occupation narratives that critique and condemn imperialist expansion and the oppression of native populations. The ambiguity inherent in this generalised allegorical narrative allows these films to be both timely, in light of contemporary events, but also timeless, in the recurrent nature of such narratives.

King Arthur, *Centurion* and *The Eagle* are examples of the generic hybridisation of the ancient world epic with two other genres. Despite these additional influences, they remain identifiable as Roman epics in their characters and narrative tropes. While the urban aesthetic of many Roman epics of the 1950s-60s is absent in these films, their use of western tropes and imagery ties them to America's own past.

Similarly, *The Eagle*'s use of American accents for its Roman characters updates the linguistic paradigm of the 1950s-60s cycle to reflect America's status as an 'empire' today. Indeed, of the three films, *The Eagle* could most convincingly be cited as an allegory for American involvement in Afghanistan (or Iraq), and MacDonald's statements while publicising the film generally support such a reading. Nevertheless, the depiction of combat in these films is not specific to American action in Afghanistan so viewers, as with other epics, may interpret the texts as they desire.

Finally, the use of narration in *King Arthur*, *The Last Legion* and *Centurion* reiterates the aforementioned motifs of oral histories, memory, and the recording of history. The Roman commander's order to have Quintus murdered and to strike all reference to the Ninth Legion's decimation from the historical record is a subtle nod to the gaps in historical knowledge that filmmakers and storytellers can exploit for their own invention. *King Arthur*, *Centurion*, *The Last Legion* and *The Eagle* all draw inspiration from events that at some point were popularised as legends, but have been adapted into (for the most part) critiques of imperialism set in a Roman province. While the two films that are the focus of the next chapter similarly depict violence in Rome's provinces, they differ in one major respect: they foreground religion in their narratives. *King Arthur* broke from the conventions of the Roman epic to depict Christianity as corrupt and cruel, but in the next chapter I explore the extent to which *Agora* continues this trend in the context of post-9/11 interfaith tensions. Finally, I build on the above discussion of torture in the War on Terror to explore how it is portrayed in *The Passion of the Christ*.

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Chapter Four – Holy War: Christianity in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Agora* (2009).

> …on September 11, and via the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, mass death came home forcefully to citizens of all religious persuasions.[1]

The majority of Roman epics from the 1950s-60s cycle included strong thematic and narrative elements concerning Christianity, whereas in the current cycle religion is a comparatively minor feature which is often either omitted or subverted. This final chapter, however, explores two films in which Christianity features prominently: Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and Alejandro Amenábar's *Agora* (2009). Religion has become an important point of discussion in post-9/11 discourse surrounding American and Middle East relations. A simple search on Google's Ngram Viewer – which records the frequency with which words are used in digitised texts – reveals that between 1960 and 2008 (the final date of entry at the time of writing) references to Christianity, Islam, and religious conflict such as 'jihad', 'infidel', 'fundamentalism', 'extremism', 'Allah', 'God', and 'religious war' have all increased in usage in and after 2001, with further spikes in 2003. A reasonable hypothesis is that the events of 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq instigated these shifts, as each event saw conflict between nations with predominantly different religions. The media adage that "if it bleeds, it leads" has, Jillian Schwedler argues, exacerbated the western view that the Middle East is a violent region.[2] This has been aggravated yet further by commentators misusing terms such as 'fundamentalism' in what Schwedler has termed a "confusing, contradictory, and all-encompassing" manner, which generalises non-violent Islamic groups (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood) with the violent (e.g. al-Qaeda).[3] She suggests that a more acceptable term to define organisations like al-Qaeda would be 'religious extremism'; another term which has seen a sizable rise in usage since 2001.[4] Such generalisations have also pervaded filmmaking. For example, Corey Creekmur has argued that the trope of using the Muslim call to prayer, the *adhaan*, on film soundtracks and over establishing shots has become a "sound of dread" through association with depictions of terrorism, and as such: "Muslim prayer asks audiences to brace themselves for the terror sure to follow."[5]

Despite this confluence of religion and international politics into violent conflict, Schwedler warns us not to assume that tension between East and West results

solely from religious difference. She asserts that: “the politics of the Middle East has never been exclusively about religion, even when religious rhetoric and symbolism has been invoked.”[6] Nevertheless, for many states in the Middle East, religion is an important part of their constitution and an understanding of it is vital to ensuring political stability.[7] The US government and military failed to appreciate this following the removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime, and the resulting difficulties in establishing peace between Iraq’s Sunni, Shi’a and Kurdish populations erupted into a civil conflict.[8]

America’s predominantly Christian population has heightened the religious dichotomy between the West and the predominantly Muslim Middle East (although many other religions co-habit the region, along with extensive Jewish and Christian populations; the latter increasing with work-motivated immigration).[9] According to a Pew Forum survey from 2007 (roughly equidistant between 9/11 and the time of writing), 78.4 percent of Americans identified themselves as Christian, with 51.3 percent of the population being Protestant; sharing their faith with then-President George W. Bush. A born-again Christian, Bush made repeated references to God and his Christian faith during public statements as President, including in his address to the nation on September 11th 2001: “I pray they [the victims] will be comforted by a power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.’”[10] After 9/11, Bush’s speeches often referred to the perpetrators of the attacks as ‘evil’, and by associating al Qaeda first with the Taliban and then Afghanistan (and later Iraq), his administration widened the threat of a specific group of religious extremists into a generalised fear of nations that are largely Islamic.[11] Indeed, Bush reportedly stated in a meeting with congressional leaders on the morning of September 12th 2001 that America’s enemy was not a group but a “frame of mind … They hate Christianity. They hate Judaism. They hate everything that is not them.”[12] Bush’s distinction between Judeo-Christians and an unnamed ‘them’ suggests he saw a division between the former religions and Islam. His grouping of Jews and Christians may in part result from Bush’s domestic constituency base, which Mary Ann Tétreault notes was pro-Israel and therefore opposed to the primarily Muslim Palestine.[13] Nevertheless, Bush’s bias in favour of Judeo-Christians created a dichotomy with those of other faiths.

However, at times the Bush administration was at pains to avoid giving the impression that the War on Terror was a religious war. For example, the campaign in Afghanistan received the title Operation Enduring Freedom after the original title, Infinite Justice, was deemed offensive to Muslims. Similarly, during the first week of air strikes on Afghanistan in 2001, Donald Rumsfeld ordered that no strikes were to be made on Friday as a sign of respect for the Muslim Sabbath. However, this would not last further into the campaign, with strikes occurring throughout Ramadan (although fewer were scheduled during prayer time).[14] On September 16th 2001, Bush referred to the War on Terror as a "crusade", a term with clear connotations of religious war between Christianity and Islam.[15] However, a day later he appeared at Washington DC's Islamic Center to make a statement distancing the actions of the September 11th hijackers from Islamic teachings, stating that:

> Acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it's important for my fellow Americans to understand that. … Islam is peace. These terrorists don't represent peace. They represent evil and war.[16]

Bush's administration again came under fire when the Undersecretary of Defence for Intelligence, Lt. Gen. William Boykin, stated in a speech to a Christian group in Oregon that America's enemies hated them: "because we're a Christian nation, because our foundation and our roots are Judeo-Christian ... and the enemy is a guy named Satan."[17] Despite the inflammatory nature of this statement and pressure from Islamic groups for Boykin to resign, Donald Rumsfeld refused to condemn him and even defended his remarks as freedom of speech.

Statements such as Boykin's, however, were of considerably less harm to America's image than the revelations of prisoner abuse that surfaced over the course of 2003 and early 2004 at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, and CIA black sites. Al Qaeda was deemed by a number of lawyers working for the US government after 9/11 to be exempt from the rulings of the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners of war.[18] As such, a number of methods were employed by the CIA and American military to intimidate and discomfort prisoners, which included methods of cultural and religious humiliation aimed specifically at Arabic peoples and Muslims.[19]

The prevalence with which religion has entered into the discourse surrounding the war on terror and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan is evident. Historical films have likewise reflected post-9/11 religious tensions between East and West, such as

in the crusader epic *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and the medieval horror film *Black Death* (2010).[20] In this chapter, I will extend this analysis to two ancient world epics produced after 9/11 that depict conflict between members of different religions: *Agora* and *The Passion of the Christ*. In so doing, I explore how the films depict civil disorder and conflict between religions in the Roman Empire, and how this could be regarded as mirroring contemporary concerns. Within my analysis, I continue my exploration of genre hybridity within the current cycle of ancient world epics, with particular emphasis on the role of horror film tropes in *The Passion of the Christ*, and the recurrent themes of father figures, torture, and imperialism.

AGORA: In Chapter Three and the Introduction I explored motifs common to the Roman epics of the 1950s-60s cycle, especially that of the protagonist who turns his back on tyrannical, imperial Rome. As I explained, this symbolic gesture has been repeatedly cited in allegorical interpretations of Roman epics as a condemnation of imperialism, both in the 1950s-60s as well as in my post-9/11 examples. Where these more recent examples differ from their predecessors is in their setting and in their treatment of Christianity. Indeed, perhaps the most notable change is the relative expulsion of Christianity from the Roman epic in *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), and *The Eagle* (2011). While *Gladiator* (2000) eschews direct reference to Christianity, it does contain visual and thematic allusions to it in a manner similar to *Spartacus* (1960), whereby Maximus is presented as a Christ-like figure who sacrifices himself to save others. *King Arthur* (2004), on the other hand, subverts the Roman epics of the previous cycle by associating Christianity as a contributing factor to Rome's corruption and downfall.

Agora, however, does not share many of the conventional motifs of a Roman epic. The narrative covers events from 391-415 AD in Alexandria, Egypt, depicting the rise of Christianity and its conflict with other religions. These clashes form the film's two halves: the first principally depicts the Christian uprising against the local pagan population who worship the Greco-Egyptian deities, culminating with the Christians sacking the Library of the Serapeum (not to be confused with Ptolemy's library in *Alexander*). The second half of the film then covers the escalating violence between Jews and Christians in the city. These events are seen from the perspective of the

film's protagonist, the Greek philosopher, mathematician and teacher, Hypatia. She is an atheist, preferring the study of science and astronomy to religious affiliation. In the second act, the leader of the Alexandrian Christians, Cyril, denounces female teachers and condemns Hypatia as a witch. She is captured by the Christians who elect to skin her alive, until Hypatia's former slave, Davus, convinces them to stone her instead. As they gather rocks, Davus secretly suffocates Hypatia to save her the pain and trauma of execution.

A Spanish production directed and co-written by Alejandro Amenábar, *Agora* became the highest grossing film in Spain in 2009. However, in the US market – which the film was seemingly targeting with its Anglo-American cast and English language dialogue – it failed to make a significant impact. This may be because it does not conform to the more conventional three-act structure of the Roman epic, its visual setting of Alexandria is not familiar to most audiences of previous epics, it has relatively little action, and it is the only ancient world epic in this cycle to have a female protagonist. Indeed, *Agora* is the only post-9/11 epic discussed in this thesis which could not be defined as a 'male epic' using Leon Hunt's formulation, cited in the Introduction.[21] However, Brandon Judell dubbed the film "a humourless feminist toga epic", while Hypatia's dedication to philosophy and extended sequences of her investigation into the heliocentric model of the universe recalls Nisbet's belief that: "audiences assume Greece is boring (or 'intellectual', which amounts to the same thing for a mainstream cinema audience weaned on pervasive anti-intellectualism)."[22] *Agora* also differs from the few previous ancient world epics with female protagonists, such as *Cleopatra* (1963). Although both these films take place in Egypt and involve a female lead in a position of authority, *Cleopatra* deals with the dichotomy of duty and desire, international conflict, military campaigns, and romance. In *Agora*, Hypatia is essentially asexual, the men around her are ineffectual until given power through allegiance with Christianity, and international relations with Rome barely features.

Similar to *King Arthur*, however, *Agora*'s depiction of Christianity is the antithesis of the 1950s-60s cycle. In films such as *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953), the hero's salvation would come through his adoption of Christianity or encounter with Jesus, which would simultaneously inspire his desertion of imperial Rome. In this dichotomy between Christian morality and godless/pagan imperialism,

the allegorical convention arose in which America identified itself with the Christians, as Maria Wyke's quote in my Introduction explained.[23] *Agora* subverts this expectation by vilifying the majority of its Christian characters. More specifically, they are portrayed as extremists who evoke comparisons to contemporary extremist groups, including al Qaeda and the Taliban. *Agora*'s Christians dress in black robes, are bearded, and many speak with Middle-Eastern accents or are played by actors with a non-Caucasian appearance. This includes Ashraf Barhom, whose most noted role in an English-language film before *Agora* was in the terrorism thriller *The Kingdom* (2007). In *Agora*, Barhom's character Ammonius and his Christian followers are introduced as taunting the local pagans and mocking their deities before forcefully throwing a pagan man onto a fire. Although we see some Christian characters performing acts of kindness, charity, and protection, these are offset by the Christian mobs rioting, attacking Jews, and attempting to skin Hypatia alive.

When questioned whether he intended the Christians to resemble the Taliban, Amenábar stated that their appearance was the product of his costume designer, but that their behaviour was an allusion to contemporary religious fundamentalism, stating:

> the movie is definitely a condemnation of fundamentalism. It's about the moment in history when the Christians were finished being persecuted and began to persecute others. The costumes are very true to the period, but I realize that the robes and beards look very much like the Taliban.[24]

While promoting the film, Amenábar, Weisz, and co-stars Oscar Isaac and Max Minghella repeatedly referenced the contemporary significance of the events and themes of the movie, which included the treatment of women in certain societies as well as religious extremism and violence.[25] Amenábar is quoted as saying:

> We realised that this particular time in the world had a lot of connections with our contemporary reality …Then the project became really, really intriguing, because we realised that we could make a movie about the past while actually making a movie about the present.[26]

Their promotion of allegorical and analogous readings of the film is furthered by the critical response in the US and UK. Roger Ebert, Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian*, and Phil de Semlyen of *Empire* magazine are among many who highlighted the film's contemporary relevance, with the most common comparison being the depiction of the Christians in the film with the Taliban. Bradshaw, for instance, states that: "Amenábar subtly invites his audience to remember the Taliban, the war on terror

and the looting of Iraq's national museum", while de Semlyen humorously remarks that: "Amenábar's epic depicts the Christians of fourth-century Alexandria as a Taliban-like cadre, as likely to boink you over the head with a rock as turn the other cheek."[27]

Fig.4.1: Cyril in *Agora*

As noted above, members of any religion can be fundamentalists while abhorring the use of violence. In *Agora*, the Christians are ultimately depicted as religious extremists, which sparked controversy among Christian groups, especially Catholics. Antonio Alonso Marcos of the Religious Anti-Defamation Observatory wrote an open letter to Amenábar denouncing the film as anti-Christian and liable to incite hatred towards Christians.[28] Father Robert Barron went so far as to claim the film draws parallels between its Christians and the Nazis in their violent acts towards Jews, including stacking and burning Jewish corpses.[29] Irene A. Artemi, a doctor of philology, criticised the film's historical inaccuracies and regarded its depiction of Christians as the product of Amenábar's atheism and an attempt to discredit Christianity.[30] As I shall discuss below, this response is the antithesis to that of *The Passion of the Christ*. Nevertheless, Amenábar countered some of these complaints by arguing that the film did present a Christian moral message in the characterisation of Hypatia, arguing:

> It all depends on what we consider by being Christian. We see Hypatia being merciful and we see [the Christians] torturing her and [wanting to] skin her alive so in that sense I found that the character Hypatia is more Christian than those killing people. The movie's not against Christians and Jews; it's against fanatics.[31]

Nevertheless, *Agora*'s disjuncture between moral righteousness and Christianity could by extension divorce the conventional association of Christianity with America in the ancient world epic. Although one could associate the film's Christians with Christian fundamentalists in America – perhaps including those who came to the support of Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* – the visual presentation of the Christians appears to draw direct parallels to Islamic extremists and most specifically to the Taliban. Alongside their violent acts and appearance, Cyril's use of a religious text (1 Timothy 2:11-15) to control and denigrate the place of women in society (and condemn Hypatia as a witch) evokes the use of *sharia* law by some Islamic groups (including Taliban-led Afghanistan) to restrict the freedoms and liberties of Muslim women.[32]

Furthermore, rather than associate America with the Christian characters, Amenábar has said that he regards the Roman Empire in the film as analogous to contemporary America.[33] Rome is, ironically, the one body other than Hypatia that has no clear religious identity in the film. In the first half, Rome remains absent until, when violence escalates, soldiers appear like riot-police to intervene. A declaration from the emperor then decrees that the Library of the Serapeum is to be handed over to the Christians; an act that, while showcasing Rome's influence over the two groups, suggests a lack of local knowledge or consideration of events on the ground. The decision results in a wealth of social, historical and cultural materials housed in the library being destroyed by the Christians – a possible allusion to the looting of Iraq's museums following the 2003 invasion.

In the second half of the film the role of Rome increases through its attribution to the character of Orestes. Originally one of Hypatia's pupils, he converts to Christianity and becomes a Roman prefect (an administrative official). Amenábar elaborates on Orestes' shifting position of authority through visual parallels between the first and second halves of the film: in the first, a number of scenes take place in Hypatia's classroom where Orestes and the other students sit on tiered seating to observe her lessons. In the second, however, this is replaced by the small senate-like chamber where the other administrators and officials sit in tiers facing Orestes, who in turn sits

on a large ornate throne. Where Hypatia was in confident command of her classroom during the earlier scenes, when she addresses Orestes in the council chamber her femininity emphasises her isolation among the elderly male politicians. Furthermore, the majority of the men have also converted to Christianity and succumbed to Cyril's popularity with the masses to move towards extremist teachings. Despite Orestes' position of authority as a representative of Rome, he too is pressured to accept Cyril's misogynistic reading of scripture and is assaulted by Ammonius for his refusal to kneel before the holy text.

Fig.4.2: Hypatia teaching Orestes (left) and Orestes addressing Hypatia (right) in *Agora*

Compared to the militaristic male protagonists of the 1950s-60s epics, and the aggressively masculine protagonists of recent epics such as Maximus, Leonidas and Achilles, Orestes and Davus rarely, if ever, exert any dominance over those around them; especially Hypatia. Davus almost rapes Hypatia until his conscience prevails, but he then fails to warn her of the Christian plot to kill her. Later, he must ask Hypatia's permission to euthanize her before she is to be stoned as he does not have the courage to take action himself. Similarly, Orestes, as a symbol of Rome and moral Christianity, is overpowered by Cyril's popular support, assaulted in the street, and unable to protect Hypatia from Cyril's Christians. A surrogate for Roman imperialism, his inability to temper the religious extremism or disharmony in Alexandria or to protect the women who suffer because of Cyril's proclamations could suggest a criticism of America's attempts to enforce order and improve the situation in Afghanistan for its female citizens: as the invasion of Afghanistan approached in 2001, the Bush administration used the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban as a humanitarian cause that justified US military action in the region.[34] However, in the film Orestes' intervention relies upon Hypatia's conversion to

Christianity, but when she refuses he is unable to protect her and she is duly killed by Christian extremists.

Fig.4.3: The camera rises over civil unrest in Alexandria in *Agora*

Unlike the 1950s-60s epic cycle where the city of Rome symbolised the empire's power, grandeur and vice, post-9/11 Roman epics have largely been set in the empire's provinces. In each, we see Rome as a corrupt, weak, or failing empire; not the stronghold of world domination as proclaimed in the prologues of the 1950s-60s epics. In *Agora*, Rome is essentially a police force with little real influence over the events occurring in Alexandria. Amenábar's depiction of civil unrest between religions and the inability of Rome to restore order could be regarded as an analogue for the US presence in Iraq following the invasion, where looting and violence between Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish populations increased. These scenes in the film feature a series of sweeping overhead shots that pull increasingly further back from the action until they reveal the entire planet. In so doing, Amenábar gives the viewer the perspective of the civil unrest as it might be seen from a contemporary drone or satellite camera. Again, the film alludes to contemporary America and their distance from ground level realities and the ability to enact change. As Amenábar has stated, *Agora* is evidently an attack on religious extremism in its varied forms, but the casting and costumes suggest that the Taliban are the principal targets of this message. In equating Rome with America, however, the film also criticises the US

role in Iraq and Afghanistan, and depicts contemporary America as an imperialist power in decline, unable to consolidate its territory and maintain order. Across these interpretations there is enough ambiguity for multiple points of view, but of the films discussed in this thesis *Agora* is most clearly engaging with the period in which it was made.

THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST *The Passion of the Christ* was chronologically the first ancient world epic to follow the release of *Gladiator*, opening in the US in February 2004. Similar to Scott's film, aspects of *The Passion of the Christ* are recognisable to audiences familiar with the 1950s-60s cycle, with Jesus' crucifixion featuring prominently in works such as *The Robe* and *Ben-Hur*, as well as the 'Christ films'. However, Gibson's epic differs from its predecessors by focussing solely on the crucifixion, as well as in its graphic depiction of violence and employment of non-English languages. Despite the relatively conservative subject matter and a Roman-era setting which is typically less contentious than ancient Greece, *The Passion of the Christ* was nevertheless an unusual gamble. It features no scenes of warfare or gladiatorial combat, and its principal conflict is instead an internal, symbolic struggle between Jesus and Satan. However, while the historical context surrounding the titular event is not explored in depth, the events depicted nevertheless occur in a Roman-occupied province today located in the Middle East, and the film features scenes of civil disturbance and violence between members of different religious groups. It is therefore a 'usable past', with the central Good versus Evil motif a ready-made allegory.

The Passion of the Christ was literally a 'passion project' for writer-director Mel Gibson, whose production company supplied the $30m budget.[35] Raised a Traditionalist Catholic, he famously rediscovered his religion in the early 1990s during rehabilitation from alcoholism after a troubled period where he reportedly contemplated suicide.[36] His reinvigorated faith seemingly manifested itself in his roles, including the Christ-like William Wallace in *Braveheart* (1995), the catholic Col. Hal Moore in *We Were Soldiers* (2002), and as a catholic priest who rediscovers his faith in *Signs* (2002). *The Passion of the Christ* was therefore regarded as Gibson's religious identity writ large on screen. As the co-writer, director, producer and biggest

celebrity name attached to the film, his image was also very much in the public eye. In press for the film, though, he went as far as to claim he had been divinely inspired, with a higher spirit working through him to make the film while he was essentially just "directing traffic."[37]

The film depicts the final hours of Jesus's life, opening with his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane and following him through his arrest, trial before the Sanhedrin, appearances before Herod and Pilate, his flogging, the road to Calvary, the crucifixion, and finally his resurrection. In its selection of this narrative and use of the Gospels (alongside the influence of other textual and visual sources), the film conforms to what Babington and Evans define as a 'Christ film'.[38] Unlike the Roman Republican period, Imperial Rome allows for narratives either contemporaneous with the life of Jesus or else during the foundation of Christianity and its growth into a popular religion. Babington and Evans have defined these two forms of Christian-themed sub-genres as the 'Christ film' and the 'Roman/Christian' epic, respectively.[39] Of the Christ film they discuss four examples: Cecil B. De Mille's *The King of Kings* (1927), Nicolas Ray's *King of Kings* (1961), George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Although they also reference Pier Paolo Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964), their focus remains on Hollywood epics.

Gibson's film adheres to certain conventions of the Christ film in its use of scriptural sources and reverence towards portraying Jesus on-screen. Although the scenes of torture make viewing uncomfortable, the film conforms to what Babington and Evans cite as a convention of the Christ film in which the viewer is directed to "gaze at the protagonist in comforting ways and, while registering others' reactions to him, forbids access to his consciousness."[40] Scorsese's fallible Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a controversial exception to this convention, but as the film makes clear from its opening credits it is based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel of the same name and not on scripture. While Gibson's film differs from Scorsese's in a number of respects, it does share some semblance to it in its nightmarish moments of supernatural horror. For DeMille, Ray and Stevens, scenes of supernatural occurrences were largely limited to the performance of miracles but, as I discuss below, Gibson's film is the antithesis to this. Furthermore, Gibson departs from all

previous depictions of the Passion narrative, including Pasolini's and Scorsese's, with his use of graphic violence.

In the Christ film it is less common to observe the 'Christian America versus Godless Imperialism' trope of the Roman/Christian epics, but allusions to contemporary events can nonetheless appear. In Ray's *King of Kings*, for instance, Babington and Evans identify allusions to the Holocaust in its depiction of Romans massacring Jews.[41] They also read allusions to the formation of Israel with Herod as the Arab 'other' persecuting the Jewish people and Barabbas's call to arms to defend the Jewish nation. Gibson's film inspired controversy over its depiction of some Jewish characters, and this debate has dominated the majority of the academic discourse on the film. Gibson defended against various attacks by claiming "Critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me in this film … They have a problem with the four Gospels."[42] His argument that the film strictly adheres to the Gospels is problematic for a number of reasons: the first is that the gospels regularly contradict each other and themselves, and so *The Passion of the Christ* is actually a selective amalgamation of the gospels and not a literal adaptation. Second, Gibson and his co-scriptwriter Benedict Fitzgerald base large portions of the film on *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Anne Catherine Emmerich, a nineteenth-century German nun and stigmatic who supposedly experienced a number of remarkably graphic visions of Jesus's Passion which were later transcribed (and possibly embellished).

Furthermore, both Emmerich's account and the Bible contain an array of supernatural elements that many would regard as symbolic or fictional occurrences. Promotional material for the film nevertheless suggests Gibson intended audiences to view the film as historical fact: published to coincide with the film's release and featuring a foreword by Gibson, *Inside the Passion: An Insider's Look at 'The Passion of the Christ'*, written by Father John Bartunek, offers a "guidebook to enrich the typical 'tourist' experiencing *The Passion of the Christ*."[43] Given full access to the set and making of the film, Bartunek's book interprets the religious significance of the film scene by scene, informing both those new to the Passion narrative while also reinforcing the meaning for those who may be only occasional church goers. The book seems designed to encourage conversions to Catholicism or perhaps Christianity at large, often using broad generalisations such as: "All Christians

believe this happened, since it is recorded in the New Testament."[44] More significantly, the book leaves no room for a theological debate and omits any agnostic or atheistic interpretations of biblical events. Bartunek argues that the supernatural events recorded in the Bible's Passion narrative are fact. For example, referring to an early scene in Gethsemane in which a host of unrealistic and unbelievable events occur (Jesus confronts Satan, tramples a spectral snake, and heals a man's severed ear, while Judas is confronted by a demon), Bartunek writes:

> In some of the early screenings, Christians familiar with the New Testament asked why the angels don't appear in the Gethsemane scene. It was another instance of the thousand-and-one-choices Christian artists must make about how closely to follow the Gospel narratives. In this case, as in many others, the choice reflects a keen cinematic prudence. Because most people haven't seen angels, it would be hard to make them appear real. Reality and believability were absolutely essential.[45]

Nevertheless, the pursuit of 'reality' extended to the use of Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic dialogue (although historically Greek would have been spoken in place of Latin, and the film incorrectly uses church Latin rather than classical Latin). The sets and costumes do evoke a sense of historical verisimilitude, and Gibson's frequent use of handheld cameras evokes a *vérité* aesthetic synonymous with realism and documentary filmmaking – although his repetitious use of slow motion undercuts the realism at times.

More controversial was the film's exceedingly graphic portrayal of Jesus' torture and crucifixion. As mentioned in the last chapter, the use of torture for judicial purposes during the medieval period was reflected in the artwork of the time, but also coincided with what Alfred McCoy calls "a subtle shift in theological emphasis from the life of Jesus to the death of Christ."[46] This was accompanied by increasingly graphic and detailed imagery of the Passion narrative which McCoy argues was: "creating an artistic convention of the pain inflicted on Christ's battered body that mimed and may have legitimated the increasingly gruesome legal spectacles of torture and public execution."[47] Furthermore, representations of the Passion narrative were not restricted to art and sculpture, but could also be seen in the passion play phenomenon.

The gospels themselves provide little detail on the methods of torture or the full extent of Jesus's ordeal, with only scattered references to him being flogged, mocked and forced to wear a crown of thorns.[48] Taking inspiration from Emmerich

and with the aid of prosthetics and CGI, Gibson's Jesus is beaten, pushed from a bridge to hang by his chains, whipped with canes and flogged with a metal-tipped cat-o'-nine tails. The crown of thorns is then beaten onto his head, he is made to carry his full cross (historically it would just have been the cross-bar), and whipped continually along the road to Calvary. Once there, his palms and feet are nailed to the cross, his shoulder dislocated, and his body crushed under the cross as it is flipped on top of him. Eventually, it is raised and he is left to crucify. After his death, his side is pierced by a Roman soldier's spear. This accumulates into what novelist Stephen King wittily (and justifiably) described as "Sam Peckinpah does Good Friday."[49]

Gibson has argued that the violence was designed to illustrate the suffering he believes Christ underwent in taking mankind's sins upon him, stating that:

> I wanted it to be shocking…And I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge…so that they see the enormity – the enormity of that sacrifice – to see that someone could endure that and still come back with love and forgiveness, even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule.[50]

He has also stated that his aim in making the film was from a desire to "help people understand and experience the suffering of Christ."[51] Yet Gibson actually does little to help audiences understand the historical reasons for Jesus's suffering, such as why the Jewish High priests wanted him crucified, the political reasons why Rome condoned this, or the hierarchy of power between the Jewish temple, Herod, and Pilate. As to why Jesus is crucified beyond the anger of the High Priests for his blasphemy, the only reason given is that it is pre-ordained or commanded by a higher power. As Jesus states, "No-one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and the power to take it up again." In so doing, it also suggests that no single person or party is complicit in killing Christ: including the Jewish priests.[52] Indeed, the hand that drives the first nail into Jesus' palm is Gibson's own; a symbolic cameo where the director acknowledges his own symbolic complicity in Christ's death.

Gibson utilises the role of the onlooker to emphasise the experiential quality of the film. This is evidenced by its structure, which Neal King believes can be split into four acts, although I favour calling his 'fourth act', the resurrection, an epilogue due to its brevity, placement, and content.[53] The first act, from the opening in Gethsemane to

Judas's death, places emphasis on the character of Judas: his betrayal of Christ, his feelings of shame, regret and guilt, and his eventual coercion by Satan and a group of demonic children to take his own life. The placement of Judas' hanging in the film marks the end of the first act, with the role of the primary onlooker passing over to Pilate. The second act then depicts the trail of Jesus through the eyes of Pilate, who is in turmoil at deciding his fate. Once the order for Jesus' crucifixion is given, the third act begins with the role of onlooker transferring to Simon of Cyrene as he watches – and aids – Jesus carry the cross to his crucifixion.

In each of the three main acts, Judas, Pilate and Simon are placed in a position where they have the ability to help Jesus. Judas not only fails, but sets in motion Jesus's Passion, whereas Pilate is torn between his own desire to release Jesus and the prospect of a riot if he denies the crowds' pleas to have him crucified. Simon, a bystander, is ordered by the Romans to help carry Jesus' cross. Initially reluctant, he finds pity and is inspired by Jesus' strength of will to help him. As King argues, "By focusing attention in this way, the writers may have made it easier for a viewer to feel like a sympathetic but guilty party".[54] Scriptwriter Fitzgerald concurs, stating that: "Often, in the course of these fifteen hours, it was going to be the people around our Lord, not what was happening to him, that was going to be controlling the story."[55]

Perhaps inspired by Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), Gibson uses an immense number of close-ups on faces throughout the film. This emphasises the emotional response of the onlookers as he juxtaposes the agonised grimaces of Jesus and the flinches, jeers, and tears of the observers. He also places his camera in amongst the crowd, as Pasolini does during scenes of Jesus's trial in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, restricting our view and making the viewer feel part of the action. Indeed, although much of the dialogue derives from the Bible (as well as some other sources), the film is driven first and foremost by its visuals. Gibson's original intent was to screen the film devoid of subtitles, meaning audiences would be wholly reliant on the imagery to follow the story and emote with the characters. The use of reaction shots and close-ups are therefore an effective way of heightening the emotional experience of the film. This is particularly evident in the characterisation of Jesus's mother, Mary, who is an ever-present onlooker along with Mary Magdalene (henceforth just Magdalene) and the disciple John. Unlike Judas, Pilate and Simon, these three do not undergo a transformation or gain new insight

through observing the Passion, but the pain and anguish they show watching Jesus' ordeal form a constant contrast to his stoic endurance.

THE HORROR FILM Gibson's approach to Jesus' Passion is best exemplified in the central set-piece of the film: the flagellation. Following Pilate's order to his commander, Abenander, that Jesus be beaten but not killed, Jesus is led into a courtyard and tied to a rock. We are introduced to the Roman soldiers as they laugh, bark and snarl at each other, showing yellowed teeth and metaphorically suggesting Jesus has been thrown to the dogs. Crucially, they also speak to each other in non-subtitled Latin, heightening the sense of the unexpected, the alien, and the audiences' identification with Jesus' isolation in this moment. In their bestial depiction they become caricatures in a similar vein (and a possible allusion) to the heightened close-ups of factory bosses and spies in Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925). Unlike the onlookers who are shot in this scene by static, stable cameras, the Romans are repeatedly shot with handheld cameras and whip pans, evoking their instability and psychotic demeanour. They proceed to whip Jesus with canes as he sinks to his knees in pain, and the images of his body are intercut with shots of the soldiers as they watch or perform the torture. Caiaphas and the priests look on with blank expressions, and then leave before the flagellation begins. When it comes, Jesus's body is torn apart in a montage of reaction shots and close-ups on his lacerated skin.

Fig.4.4: The flagellation sequence in *The Passion of the Christ*. Clockwise from top left: a Roman guard mocks Jesus; torture implements are displayed; the guards stand over the flagellated Jesus; Pilate presents the flagellated Jesus to the crowds

Extended sequences of torture are not especially common in the ancient world epic, although Kim Newman has compared scenes of torture in contemporary horror films to *Gladiator* and the love of elaborate games, unwilling participants, and bloodshed in Roman history.[56] Nevertheless, previous 'Christ films' rarely showed Jesus' torture in any detail or for a prolonged period. Even the eponymous hero of *Spartacus* is not seen to be tortured before his crucifixion. Instead, he is made to fight in a makeshift arena for the sadistic pleasure of Crassus and the other Romans, reiterating Newman's point. As discussed in Chapter Three, torture has gained newfound popularity (or profundity) in post-9/11 cinema and television. One particular addition to the horror film genre is the so-called 'torture porn' film, which Wetmore asserts is a product of the post-9/11 discourse on torture. He argues: "Horror cinema began to reflect this concern, the ambiguous relationship between Americans as victims, Americans as heroic defenders of freedom and Americans as torturers. 'Torture porn' was born in the media's presentation of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo."[57]

The term 'torture porn' derives from the title of a 2006 article for *New York Magazine* by David Edelstein (although as Newman points out, the term does not actually appear in the article itself, so may have come from an editor).[58] Newman, Wetmore

and Edelstein identify films such as the *Saw* (2004-2010) and *Hostel* (2005-2011) franchises, *Wolf Creek* (2005), *The Ruins* (2008), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010) as examples. They also suggest that *The Passion of the Christ* contains moments reminiscent of these films, such as the shots of a table decorated with various implements of torture, and the extended scenes of violent punishment and body horror.[59] Jeffrey Richards similarly concludes in relation to Gibson's film: "there is little to distinguish it, apart from the Latin and Aramaic, from the currently popular genre of exploitation gore-fests like *Hostel* and *Saw*."[60]

Wetmore identifies a number of identifying features of 'torture porn' films that reflect their contemporary concerns. He states:

> In all of these films [except the *Saw* franchise], Americans roughly the same age as those fighting in the Middle East travel to a nation where they are not safe. The young people are then set upon by the dangers of the foreign land, in the form of evil foreigners, natural and supernatural terrors and their own naiveté. Being an American does not protect them. Being an American, as in *Hostel*, in fact, makes them targets.[61]

Furthermore, he argues that not all films that feature torture are 'torture porn', citing *Syriana* (2005) and *Rendition* (2007) as direct depictions of contemporary use of torture in the War on Terror. Wetmore then draws on an essay by Jeremy Morris, in which he posits four characteristics that differentiate 'torture porn' from other films depicting torture: "First, torture must be 'the primary vehicle of fear', second, the torture must be a 'realistic depiction', third, a rationale must be provided for the torture, and lastly, the victim must then be transformed into a torturer him or herself."[62]

While *The Passion of the Christ* may not wholly conform to this list, Jesus's torture and crucifixion do become the primary goal of Caiaphas, the Jewish High Priest, once Jesus refuses to denounce his claims to be the son of God, and the depiction of torture is realistic (if not heightened). However, the lack of historical context to the crucifixion limits how clear the rationale for the torture is, Jesus' conflict with Satan could be regarded as (at least symbolically) the primary vehicle of fear, and Jesus does not become a torturer himself. So while *The Passion of the Christ* is not indisputably a 'torture porn' film, it nevertheless contains elements of the sub-genre. To an extent, this includes the casting of the young, muscular American actor James Caviezel as Jesus, which could allude to the 'torture porn' motif of young Americans in a foreign country. These films usually feature a young American protagonist who

is confident of his country's global superiority, and so their torture at the hands of a foreign entity becomes a symbolic attack on the US. However, when the America character survives the brutal ordeal and exacts a cathartic (for them and the audience) retaliation on their torturer, Jason Middleton believes the motif: "reaffirms a (neo)conservative view of the necessity for American aggression in what is represented as a corrupt and dangerous world."[63] Where *The Passion of the Christ* differs to this, though, is in the catharsis deriving from Jesus' endurance of pain and subsequent resurrection, and not a violent retaliatory action, as Edelstein notes:

> Are there moral uses for this sort of violence? Certainly Mel Gibson aimed to achieve a kind of catharsis—a purification—via the two-hour beating, lashing, and scourging of his Jesus, although some of us felt that he'd made his usual bloody revenge picture in which the revenge part had been lopped off (or left to the spectator).[64]

"His usual revenge picture" here applies to a wide array of Gibson's action films. Many include scenes of torture followed by redemptive violence, such as *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Payback* (1999), and perhaps most famously *Braveheart*. In his medieval epic, Gibson stars as Scottish hero William Wallace who is condemned to be "purified by pain": publically tortured and executed by being hanged, drawn and quartered. Prior to this, Wallace is seen in his prison cell praying to God. Gibson alludes to this moment in the opening sequence of *The Passion of the Christ*, in which Jesus prays in Gethsemane. In both films, the characters are lit by white beams cutting through predominantly blue lighting and shadow. Wallace, like Jesus, prays in reference to his upcoming ordeal: "I'm so afraid. Give me the strength to die well." Wallace, again like Jesus, is then led through a jeering crowd to his place of execution, tortured by representatives of an imperialistic empire, and tied to a cruciform structure before his death. As with Christ, Wallace's ability to endure pain inspires conversion amongst those in the crowd who at first jeer at his suffering but soon encourage him to beg for mercy and end his pain. Although allusions to Christ's crucifixion in Hollywood cinema are not uncommon, Gibson's depiction of Wallace's execution appears to be both inspired by Christ's Passion while also informing his own depiction of the Passion itself. Similarly, Gibson's next film as director after *The Passion of the Christ*, *Apocalypto* (2006), also features scenes of ritual punishment, jeering crowds, and public execution, although it ends with a sequence of retaliatory violence as a form of catharsis following the extended scenes of suffering the hero has endured. As Quinby argues:

> *The Passion* [*of the Christ*], however, upholds endurance over revenge, and by the end of *Braveheart* and *Apocalypto*, that theme is also ultimately embraced as the higher calling. In each case the overriding message is that undergoing torture rather than exacting revenge makes the man a hero if he withstands it with nobility, bravery, and honor. For these heroes suffering bloody torture – not inflicting it – is what makes them worthy in Gibson's eyes.[65]

Furthermore, Jesus differs from the victims of 'torture porn' films in that he is complicit in his torture; he appears to foresee it but elects to endure it nonetheless as a symbolic act of sacrifice. In so doing, the catharsis of his punishment, unlike the horror film depictions of torture, is that he could endure such pain but maintain his faith throughout. His reward is his resurrection.

This is the most miraculous sequence in the film; or to borrow a phrase from Mark Kermode, the most "phantasmagorical".[66] Indeed, Kermode argues that *The Passion of the Christ*'s similarities to the 'torture porn' genre in its depiction of graphic violence are not the film's only associations to the horror genre. The opening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane is shrouded in thick mists, moonlight, and silhouetted trees, while unseen birds screech and the non-diegetic soundtrack creates an eerie tone. The appearance of Satan, his conjuring of a snake, the healing of a severed ear by supernatural powers, and the demon that snarls at Judas are all comparable to events typically synonymous with horror films rather than ancient world epics. Stephen Prothero has likewise pointed out the inclusion of "shackles and chains, sadistic torturers, innocent maiden, stone-heavy architecture, and supernatural terror" in the film are tropes of Gothic horror.[67]

Fig.4.5: Satan and a demonic child in *The Passion of the Christ*

Similarly, Satan appears throughout the film, with perhaps the most memorable of these moments being the one during the flagellation sequence. Before the high priests leave, Satan is seen gliding unseen among them. This has been interpreted by Thistlewaite as suggesting that the Jews were in league with Satan.[68] However, while the scene may suggest Satan is working through the priests, it does not suggest there is a conscious unity between them. They are unable to see him, inferring that they do not have any conscious knowledge of him influencing their actions. Instead, this appearance recalls the opening scene in Gethsemane, where Satan tells Jesus that: "No man can bear this burden…No one. Ever. No. Never." The burden referred to is that of humanity's sins, symbolised by the suffering Jesus endures. By appearing at the beginning of Jesus' physical torture, Satan is again suggesting to him that he will not be able to endure it. When, at the end of the whipping, Jesus manages to stand up – to the shock of the Roman soldiers – it is a gesture of defiance to Satan rather than to them or the Jewish Priests. Satan appears again when Mary and Magdalene move out of the watching crowd and begin to weep for Jesus's pain and their inability to comfort him. Magdalene kneels and hugs Mary around the waist, and Mary comforts Magdalene in a reassuringly maternal manner. We then see the antithesis of this relationship as Satan glides through the Roman torturers cradling a child in his arms. Again, the Romans cannot see him, suggesting he is either working through them or is appearing only to Jesus. He then reveals the child in his arms to have the face of an elderly man, in a mockery of the traditional image of the Madonna and child designed to taunt the flagellated Jesus.

Throughout the film, Satan is the embodiment of good gone wrong; a view reiterated by Bartunek in his companion book. A baby is supposed to be the ultimate form of purity but is here corrupted, while Satan's appearance appears to be that of an attractive woman rendered androgynous. Indeed, Gibson has said on the DVD release's special features that his intention for the look of Satan in the film was that it would be appealing, but that there would be something unsettling and "not quite right" about it.[69] Similarly, the young children who taunt Judas into taking his own life are revealed to be demonic spirits. Bartunek explains:

> Using the demonic children was another way to manifest the film's conception of evil as something good gone horribly wrong. The children connote innocence, loyalty, docility; the

> demonic twist connotes lost innocence, lost loyalty, lost docility – losses that Satan uses to drive Judas to the brink of despair.[70]

Unlike other Christ films that glory in Jesus's miracles, such as healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and raising the dead, Gibson's film focuses instead on the sinister or frightening aspects of the supernatural. As Kermode summarises:

> Ultimately, for all the theological bluster and intense inter-faith arguments which it has provoked, *The Passion* seems to me a quintessential horror film, a visceral cinematic assault which is no more or less 'Christian' than Ken Russell's *The Devils* or Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*. All are examples of extreme movie-making from flamboyant film-makers who are passionately obsessed with the mysteries of Catholicism. But all are also rooted in the saleable aesthetic of the carnival sideshow; promising the audience an eye-opening spectacle of grotesque proportions.[71]

Wetmore has noted a rise in religious-orientated horror films since 9/11 in which "fear is generated because the religious teachings about evil are correct. There is a devil, there are demons, evil does exist and it can and must be fought and exorcized."[72] He goes on to list an array of films concerning exorcism released between 2004 and 2011; a theme significant to Kermode, who has elsewhere stated that *The Passion of the Christ* bears a similarity to *The Exorcist* (1973).[73] Although Kermode does not specify what form this similarity takes, the reasons are evident: *The Exorcist* depicts a demonic presence which possesses a young girl while her mother is rendered helpless and must watch as her child is tortured by the demon, undergoing a physically disturbing transformation. Those who conventionally hold power within society – the police and doctors – are helpless to intervene, and so two priests from the Catholic faith are brought in to exorcise the demon. The conflict, although it has physical manifestations, becomes a battle of faith between the demon and the priests. Both die in order to save the child, with Father Karras throwing himself to his death after taking the demon, Pazuzu, into his own body. Through the narrative, the themes of faith, the mother-child relationship, sacrifice, and the corruption of innocence are pronounced. In *The Passion of the Christ*, we see another mother-child relationship play out with a demonic force on hand to taunt both figures with a corruption of innocence visualised through deformed manifestations of baby and child. Despite Pilate's position of power in society, he ultimately seems unable – either through personal fears or through the predestined sequence of events – to intervene, and Jesus undergoes a disturbing physical transformation through his torture. He is sacrificed to save others, taking the burden of sin upon himself. While the passion narrative obviously predates *The Exorcist*,

Gibson's focus on the disturbing, sinister aspects of the supernatural nevertheless locates his film within the tradition of earlier horror cinema concerning faith, including *The Exorcist*, *The Omen* (1976) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). By increasing the relevance of Satan in the film, Gibson gives us the ultimate antagonist. The film therefore becomes a story about conflict between evil personified and a hero whose objective is, essentially, to die. To do so, he must first bear an inhuman amount of pain and suffering. William Fulco, who translated the film's dialogue into Aramaic, has stated that "Mel was very intent on having a macho Jesus in charge. He wanted to make sure the Passion was something Jesus did, not something for which he was a victim."[74]

Fig.4.6: Jesus prays for strength in the Garden of Gethsemane in *The Passion of the Christ*

Comparing *The Passion of the Christ* to a horror film is a provocative action, and caused significant controversy in New Zealand. The country's Christian Society for the Promotion of Community Standards (SPCS), publicly protested the rating given to the film by Bill Hastings, the Chief Censor of Film and Literature. Hastings likened *The Passion of the Christ* to a horror film in its depiction of torture and supernatural occurrences, but was met with a public complaint that his comparison was "irresponsible", and a counter argument that:

> the level of violence (and consequent suffering) is high in *The Passion*, but it is apposite…It is clearly not intended to, nor does it, titillate the audience, but rather overwhelms the audience

> with the sense of genuine self-giving sacrifice, love and forgiveness that overpowers and defeats the forces of evil motivating perpetrators of violence.[75]

This is a somewhat idealised perspective of Gibson's film, and appeals principally to a Christian interpretation of it. In reality, the film is an ancient world epic which hybridises the genre with aspects of the horror film in its thematic content, supernatural events, and graphic torture sequences. In so doing, it updates and intensifies the torture experience to suit a modern audience, while also creating an unsettling undercurrent of supernatural imagery and motifs to suggest to viewers that Jesus' struggle was not just physical, but a psychological struggle envisioned by these supernatural images.

While these details appear to make the film's content specific to the Passion narrative and its significance to Christians, the film also features elements of recent historical epics that have been read as analogues and analogies for contemporary events. As with *Agora* and *King Arthur*, the Romans in *The Passion of the Christ* are occupying a Middle Eastern province wherein they struggle to maintain law and order. If this is equated with the American presence in Iraq in 2004, it may explain Pilate's sympathetic portrayal in the film in that it acknowledges the difficulties American soldiers were experiencing in the early months of the occupation. The film also reiterates the trope of the absent father/abandoned son, although it does not appear in its typical combat context. Nevertheless, Jesus endures a form of *katabatic* narrative in which he is led, with Satan as his *psychopompos*, through a metaphorical underworld in which he is tortured, only to re-emerge in his resurrection. Throughout his ordeal, he is seemingly abandoned by his father and betrayed by those in patriarchal roles (the Jewish Priests, Pilate), even asking "My God, why have you forsaken me?" However, at the moment of his death a rain drop – like a tear – falls to earth and causes an earthquake that splits the Jewish temple in two. Through this symbolic display of sadness and rage, it suggests that father and son have reconciled following the initial abandonment. Furthermore, this narrative may in turn have inspired the interaction between father-figures and sons in the Greek mythological epics discussed in Chapter Two; the sons all suffer, but are ultimately rewarded or reconciled with their divine father(-figure). However, while aspects of Gibson's portrayal of imperialist occupation and paternal abandonment could be regarded as alluding to events in Iraq or Afghanistan, the links are tenuous

and evidence to support them is hypothetical. Nevertheless, in the next section I discuss how the film was appropriated by a section of the American viewing audience for what could be regarded as an allegorical agenda.

***THE PASSION* AS PROPAGANDA** In Chapter Two I argued that *300* (2007) was embraced by some viewers as a 'wish-fulfilment fantasy' for American involvement in the Middle East. In its (arguably right wing) depiction of the morally righteous Spartan defence of freedom and their devastation of the Persian army, it re-enacted the basic East/West conflict at the heart of the Iraq War through the distancing guise of ancient history. In so doing, it operated in a similar manner to *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) in relation to the Vietnam War. As Paul Cartledge argued, the Spartan sacrifice at Thermopylae could be regarded as ideological suicide in defence of Western values. With *The Passion of the Christ*, Mark Pizzato has regarded Jesus' sacrifice as engaging with a similar theme, arguing:

> *The Passion of the Christ*, combining horror-film violence with mass-media fetishism and devotional rites, becomes much more than mere entertainment. It is a well-honed, double-edge sword, enlightening audiences with cathartic compassion and fear, yet refocusing the current rage of a terrorist age to perpetuate the dangerous ideals of cosmic battle and warrior sacrifice, giving our ordinary mortality a divine dimension.[76]

The "dangerous ideals" to which Pizzato refers is the willingness among some people to give their lives for their beliefs, especially their religious beliefs. The ideological suicide of the extremist hijackers on 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror and ensuing conflicts brought the concept of a modern religious war into public discussion, as noted at the start of this chapter. In light of this, some communities in America utilised the message of sacrifice and endurance embodied in *The Passion of the Christ* as a rallying call for Christianity. Gibson, however, made no such connections between his film and the conflicts in the Middle East. Furthermore, he spoke against the war in Iraq while promoting his next film, *Apocalypto*, comparing the brutal acts of human sacrifice perpetrated by one of the Mayan tribes in the film to the US "sending guys off to Iraq for no reason".[77] Nevertheless, *The Passion of the Christ* became an effective propaganda tool during a period in which some audiences, especially those on the Christian right, saw their faith as under threat.

Indeed, Johnathan Vincent has noted the use of martial language among Christian groups following 9/11, such as naming congregations “Kingdom Warriors” “Force Ministries” or “Campus Crusade”, as well as the proliferation of religious language used by the US military, like having “faith in the mission.”[78] This latter point can also be found in the statements of Lt. General Boykin, referenced at the start of this chapter, which emphasised the religious divide in the War on Terror. Gibson’s film – perhaps unintentionally – tapped into this sense of national or religious embattlement following 9/11 in a similar manner to how films such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001) resonated with audiences in the months following the attacks. The president of the Southern Baptist Convention, for instance, stated that Gibson’s film was: “providence from God, that in the middle of an international war on terrorism, in the midst of a cultural and domestic war for the family, God raises up a standard.”[79] Similarly, a conservative Christian group, Women Influencing the Nation, stated that: “This battle has become bigger than Mel Gibson, and even bigger than this movie itself. It is a defining moment in the Culture War for the future of our country, our civilization and the world.”[80]

In promoting the film Gibson’s production company, Icon, approached the Christian public relations firm Outreach. They led a multi-platform campaign designed to unite various Christian groups to support the film and its message, that: “Christ died for our sins.”[81] A website created by Outreach advised churches to begin designing week-long activities related to the Passion to coincide with the movie’s release, and also to spread the word to the local community:

> Carefully choose a neighbourhood you believe God wants you to reach. With multiple prayer teams, walk every street and pray for every house, asking that God would reach each person with the message of the cross through exposure to *The Passion of the Christ*.[82]

One Texas businessman booked out an entire multiplex to screen the film on its opening day to more than 6,000 viewers.[83] Although he stated that the film would primarily appeal to the already converted, he wanted to inspire them to become more actively Christian. Christ films have traditionally not fared as well at the box office as Roman/Christian films, but *The Passion of the Christ* took over treble the worldwide takings of *King Arthur*, released that same year, in large part owing to the mobilisation of the Christian right who flocked to cinemas.[84]

When claims of anti-Semitism arose, they were interpreted by some Christian groups as a Jewish and liberal attack on conservative Christianity. The debate became politicised, as polls found frequent church goers generally voted for Republicans, and by mobilising their community in support of the film they were making a statement of political solidarity against the Democratic, academic, and liberal communities who were criticising the film. In Caldwell's words, support for *The Passion of the Christ* became "a red state/blue state issue."[85] These political divides also influenced the response in America to the revelations surrounding the US use of torture. The Republican government had enacted many of the steps taken to utilise torture in the War on Terror, and right-wing commentators like Rush Limbaugh defended the American perpetrators. Quinby has even cited a 2009 Pew Forum survey that would seem to confirm that regular church goers believed torture could be justified (although a thorough study is needed to provide more reliable results).[86] *The Passion of the Christ* arrived before the photographs from Abu Ghraib had been released, but revelations that torture was occurring in sites such as Guantánamo Bay had already broken in 2003. As McCoy states: "Whether coming to the cinema as ordinary moviegoers or as pious Christians, tens of millions of Americans now saw torture normalized as a central facet in the life and death of their saviour."[87] Elsewhere, McCoy expands his argument to suggest that the film's "blood-soaked scourging of the messiah may have prepared the American public for quiet acceptance of the Abu Ghraib photographs."[88]

Similarly, Stephen Prothero has reasoned that 9/11 helped unite Catholics and Protestants in appreciating not just the "meaning of the crucifixion" but also "the fact of it", adding:

> on September 11, and via the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, mass death came home forcefully to citizens of all religious persuasions. So it should not be surprising that Americans are beginning to frown at the happy-face Jesus [89]

More than any other Christ film to date, *The Passion of the Christ* dwells upon and graphically visualises Christ's suffering and pain. The film appears to have been made as a reflection of Gibson and his crew's devout faith and belief in the significance of the Passion narrative. However, it was appropriated by the Christian right in America during a period in which 9/11 and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan had created the impression that the country was engaged in a religious

war where Christianity and American values were under threat. Similar to the way in which *300* could be construed as an allegorical, wish-fulfilment of the Iraq War, so *The Passion of the Christ* can be interpreted as a timely visualisation of Christian endurance. It recalls the epic cycle of the 1950s-60s in films such as *The Robe* and *Ben-Hur*, in which characters witness Christ's crucifixion, find faith in him, and are met with reward and salvation. For embattled American Christians in the years after 9/11, the film is a cathartic reminder of how Jesus endured great suffering but was ultimately rewarded.

Produced during a period of heightened tension between members of different faiths, especially Christians and Muslims, *Agora* and *The Passion of the Christ* portray scenes of suspicion, rivalry and violence among rival religious groups within a historical setting. However, they do so with disparate objectives. Similar to *King Arthur*, *Agora* subverts the typical depiction of Christianity familiar from Roman and New Testament epics from the 1950s-60s cycle. Rather than being part of the disenfranchised group that suffer Roman persecution, the Christians in *Agora* are fanatics who incite violence, preach intolerance, and ultimately bring about the death of the protagonist. While Amenábar stated that the film is a "condemnation of fundamentalism", it is more accurately a condemnation of extremism. This is constructed through allusions to the Taliban and al Qaeda through the appearance, teachings, and actions of the film's Christian characters. While paralleling past and present, Amenábar's association between historical Christians and contemporary Muslim extremists suggests a violent and immoral lineage for contemporary Christians, and similarly condemns modern Christian fundamentalism and extremism. In so doing, the film both reinforces and subverts the trope of many late 1990s and post-9/11 action thrillers of portraying Arabic and Muslim characters as terrorists and villains. Amenábar's unusual approach to religion in the ancient world epic – perhaps enabled by his Spanish identity and atheistic beliefs which distance him from America's predilection for Christianity – establishes *Agora* as an unusual addition to the genre, confirmed by its inclusion of a female protagonist.

While *The Passion of the Christ*'s treatment of violence and supernatural horror differentiates it from its generic predecessors, at its core it is a deeply traditional,

conservative epic. In displaying Jesus' sacrifice and exemplary endurance of pain through faith, the film reaffirms the message of the Passion narrative for Christian audiences in a manner similar to that of *Ben-Hur* and *The Robe*. The film's portrayal of this symbolically significant event was then appropriated by a members of the Christian right in America and used as a form of propaganda to renew devotion to their faith during a period in which many saw it as being under attack from non-Christians during the War on Terror. The film's message of endurance through faith proved to be an allegorical message that resonated with US audiences, in particular, and it is to date the most financially successful ancient world epic of the current cycle. While it does not feature a narrator or reveal the recording of history, the film does feature a prominent father/son relationship dealing with issues of abandonment and reconciliation. Furthermore, the film's incorporation of imagery and aesthetics from the horror genre provides further evidence of the continued hybridisation of the ancient world epic in the current cycle.

Where *The Passion of the Christ* and *Agora* are similar is in their portrayal of the Roman Empire. While theoretically in control of their respective provinces, Pilate and Orestes are overwhelmed by the religious 'mob' which confronts them and in each case the protagonist is killed through Rome's failure to quell the disturbance. One could interpret this motif as reflective of the American military's failure to restore order to Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime. *Agora*, more than most films discussed in this thesis, appears to allude to current events, but its plot is not directly analogous to events in the Middle East or the actions of Christians in America. As an allegory, it is a condemnation of fundamentalism and extremism, but offers little suggestion of an optimistic future in which religions could co-exist peacefully. Similarly, while elements of *The Passion of the Christ*, such as its depiction of torture, could be regarded as allusions to contemporary events the film ultimately reiterates a long-standing religious allegory for enduring suffering through faith. As with the films discussed in the previous chapters, the ambiguity of interpretation allows the current cycle of ancient world epics the ability to operate on multiple levels without a singular, definitive interpretation.

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Conclusion

This thesis has explored the depiction of warfare in post-9/11 ancient world epics and assessed the various allegorical and analogous readings these films have inspired. Across the preceding four chapters I have shown that, in the majority of cases, the perceived relevance of these films to contemporary events, including the War on Terror and ensuing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, is the product of the films' hybridisation with other genres as well as the thematic conventions of the ancient world epic itself. These conventions were established by the 1950s-60s cycle, resurrected by *Gladiator* in 2000, and form the basis of the ancient world epic's core narrative trope, in which a disenfranchised group fights for freedom against a tyrannical adversary. American foreign policy in the wake of 9/11 has brought particular topics to cultural and media attention, such as imperialism, East/West conflict, torture, guerrilla warfare, cultural identity, religious conflict, and the concept of 'freedom'. In this respect the ancient world is, to use Eldridge's term, a 'usable past' with which to explore these issues.[1] Furthermore, the War on Terror's exhumation of Cold War rhetoric involving American exceptionalism and an 'Us versus Them' dichotomy – built in part on ethnic and religious differences between America and the Middle East – provided a similar backdrop to the current cycle of ancient world epics as to that of the 1950s-60s cycle. These similarities may be coincidental, but they suggest that the ancient world epic lends itself to themes of ideological conflict and imperialism. However, while depictions of Rome and other ancient empires in the 1950s-60s cycle were ambiguous in their status as analogues, the depictions of empire in the current cycle – while still partially ambiguous – more commonly identify America as the modern equivalent. In many cases this can form the foundation of allegorical readings which are critical of empire-building activities, and would suggest that a number of post-9/11 ancient world epics are engaging with the period in which they were made.

This conclusion would appear to be supported by details in the films themselves, many of which are embodied in the cycle's hybridisation between the ancient world epic and other genres. Imagery common to post-9/11 (and post-invasion of Iraq) combat and horror films, such as depictions of torture and guerrilla warfare, pervade a number of recent ancient world epics, and in the case of the combat film they

mirror the genre's evolution from the pro-interventionism stance of the late 1990s/early 2000s wave to the anti-interventionism Iraq War films of 2005-8. However, this amalgamation of genres, what Bordwell terms 'refraction', ultimately contributes to the ambiguity of the current cycle of ancient world epics. Nowhere is this more evident than in the repeated use of allusions to combat imagery that can equally be associated with Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam. Indeed, the production histories of a number of these films suggest that the Vietnam War has been the primary analogous influence, but that its themes and tropes – as reflected in the evolution of the combat film – are applicable and can operate as analogies for Iraq, Afghanistan, or even the American frontier experience. Again, the ambiguity in these interpretations contributes to the lack of specificity with which a single theory can be supported. Instead, as with the ancient world epics' own conventions, the current cycle ultimately operates as an allegorical critique of imperialism in all its forms and throughout history. These films reiterate Jeff Smith's conclusion to his analysis of *The Robe* as an analogy for the HUAC trials, wherein he states:

> By equating Rome's persecution of Christians with a more generalized notion of political repression, Maltz's dramatic concept was flexible and capacious enough to support myriad readings depending on who one identifies as oppressor and oppressed.[2]

The same is true for post-9/11 ancient world epics; while occasional details appear to allude to events during the War on Terror and its ensuing conflicts, there is insufficient evidence to support one such reading as unequivocal. The films are, to borrow Smith's phrase, "flexible and capacious enough to support myriad readings."

Furthermore, while certain films, such as the Roman-Britain epics, suggest that their genre hybridity is primarily inspired by the allegorical potential they bestow, this cycle of ancient world epics nevertheless operates within a competitive industrial marketplace. To reiterate: Bordwell describes the process of 'refraction', as "sometimes opportunistically, grabbing material from the wider culture (whether that material reflects mass sentiment or not) and transforming it through narrative and stylistic conventions."[3] The ancient world epic had been absent from cinema screens as an extensive cycle of films since the 1960s, and in reaching out to new audiences the genre has incorporated aspects of other genres with its semantic features. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of *300*, a film which adopted a radically distinct visual aesthetic within the genre after the model presented by *Troy*

and *Alexander* was deemed “broken”, in Snyder’s words. The film’s success has since inspired multiple imitators, and is evidence that economic incentives motivate the themes and content of the films as much as, if not more so, than their potential to engage with contemporary issues.

One of the contributions this thesis makes to the study of the ancient world in cinema has been to cover a range of films in the current cycle in order allow comparisons to be made between it and the 1950s-60s cycle. In so doing, we can identify where the current cycle repeats previous tropes and motifs and where it deviates, thus charting the genre’s evolution. Foremost amongst the differences is the current cycle’s propensity to depict conflict between nations or states ahead of the internal, ideological conflicts which dominated the previous cycle. That this was going to be a feature of this cycle was indicated by the first wave of epics to arrive following *Gladiator* and 9/11, most notably in the form of the Greek epic: *Troy* and *Alexander* repeated the subjects of the 1950s epics *Helen of Troy* and *Alexander the Great*, respectively, depicting conflict between Greece and nations which are today part of the Middle East. In depicting these wars the films bypassed a number of the potential pitfalls associated with ancient Greek culture in cinema, but also appeared to be timely reflections of contemporary conflicts. However, as I discussed in Chapter One, the films’ productions pre-date a number of significant events during the War on Terror, and similarities between them are largely coincidental. Although Petersen attempted to draw parallels between his film and the actions of the Bush administration, *Troy*, like *Alexander*, ultimately reiterates the message of its 1950s predecessor. The films either condemn imperialism or depict the ramifications of over expansion and the corrupting influence of power. Through allusions to twentieth century conflicts, namely WWII and the Vietnam War, they illustrate a familiar message of the hardships and futility of war.

A number of these points similarly apply to *King Arthur*, and are reiterated in the subsequent Roman-Britain epics *Centurion* and *The Eagle*. The films and their setting had little-to-no precedent in the Hollywood epics of the 1950s-60s, and likewise drew little from the British production *The Viking Queen*. Nevertheless, they utilised the Roman occupation of Britain to create a critical portrait of imperialism and

the expansion of boundaries by portraying the frontier experience as violent and bleak. In so doing, the films differ to the majority of previous Roman epics which focused on Eastern provinces with biblical significance or the urban landscape of Rome, and primarily featured the persecution of small groups – such as Christians or slaves – under Roman rule. In the Roman-Britain films' depiction of an imperial power occupying a less-developed nation and encountering resistance in the form of a guerrilla campaign, there are clear parallels to the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the films either predate the conflicts or else contain material that is equally applicable to America's frontier experience or the Vietnam War. As such, they cannot be specified as Iraq or Afghanistan War analogies. Again, though, the films can be read as allegorical condemnations of imperialism, in that they depict the Roman Empire as corrupt and/or in a period of decline, but there remains insufficient evidence to say with any certainty that they are referencing the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Even in the case of Kevin MacDonald's statements regarding *The Eagle*, America, and the occupation of Afghanistan, we must concede that his multiple references to the western genre in the film opens up the possibility that it can also be read as an analogy for the American frontier experience. Indeed, throughout this thesis we have seen that a director's publicised interpretation of their work can guide our interpretation, but they do not mean alternate or contradictory readings are not equally credible.

In *Agora* and *The Passion of the Christ* we again see depictions of provinces under Roman occupation where Rome struggles to assert control. Of particular relevance to these films, however, is their depiction of religious conflict and unrest. These scenes appear to mirror those seen in Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein's government, as well as the wider dichotomy between the predominantly Christian US and Islamic Middle East in the War on Terror. Although *Agora* is critical of the Christians in its narrative, their physical appearance and actions appear to be allusions to the Taliban and contemporary Muslim extremism. This reading was reiterated by the film's director and cast while promoting the film, with the former stating that: "we realised that we could make a movie about the past while actually making a movie about the present.[4]" However, while the film's themes are relevant today, such as religious extremism and the treatment of women in society, they are not specific to the present climate. In the case of *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel

Gibson's portrayal of an event of great significance to his religious identity was appropriated by members of the Christian right in America and essentially used as propaganda to encourage renewed devotion to Christianity during a period in which they saw their faith as embattled. The film's message of endurance of suffering through faith and the subsequent rewards it entails proved to be an allegorical message that resonated with US audiences, in particular, and aided the film in becoming what is, to date, the most financially successful epic of this cycle at the US box office. Again, *The Passion of the Christ* and *Agora* contain material which alludes to contemporary events, but ultimately they operate as allegories that are applicable to their present but not isolated to it.

Of the ancient world epics released after *Gladiator*, none have had the same degree of cultural and generic impact as *300*. As with the previous epics, its depiction of an East/West conflict and its allusions to the US military in the depiction of the Spartans inspired various analogous readings in relation to the Iraq War. Similarly, its portrayal of the Persians inflamed tensions between the US and Iran, where it was deemed American propaganda. While makers denied any such analogous intentions, the range of often contradictory interpretations that appeared upon its release illustrates the difficulty in claiming any as unequivocal. Nevertheless, in the film's stylised depiction of an elite Western army decimating an Eastern adversary in the name of freedom, *300* resonated with a section of the US viewing audience and enabled the film to become a commercial success, spawning a sequel and a host of imitators. The film evidently contains an allegorical message in its glorification of the defence of 'freedom', and the Bush administration's utilisation of this term allows for easy association between the film and the period in which it was made. However, as Monica Cyrino and McCrisken and Pepper have argued, 'freedom' has become a universal theme of historical epics because of its worldwide audience appeal.[5] Again, economic incentives appear to influence the films' content to a greater extent than its contemporary social and political context.

Despite this, arguments have been made that, while *Gladiator*'s success inspired the production of this cycle of ancient world epics, the genre has continued in part because of its usefulness as an allegorical or analogous vehicle. Andrew Elliot's belief is that:

> the epic came back because, simply, we *needed* it back; we needed it to serve a purpose it had once fulfilled as a convenient series of metaphors to critique the present, and the complex industrial, commercial, creative and demographic conditions for its return just so happened to have fallen into the place at the turn of the millennium.[6]

Elliot's statement is problematical for a number of reasons. It places the industrial aspects of the genre's revival secondary to its allegorical use, which ignores the fact that not all the films in the cycle – including some of the most successful – have been identified as analogies or allegories by critics or audiences. It is therefore additional evidence that this aspect of the cycle is not at the forefront of the genre's revival nor an indication that 'we' (whoever that may be) "needed" the epic to return. *Gladiator*'s success enabled subsequent epics – some of them in development for many years – to be made, and although the results were not all resounding successes, *300* appeared to revitalise the genre and take it in a tonally and aesthetically new direction.

Indeed, *300*'s adaptation of a comic book and its unusual approach to visualising the ancient world using CGI paved the way for a series of future releases. Unlike *300*'s mythologizing of an historical event through the device of the unreliable narrator, these subsequent releases derived their narratives from Greek mythology and the tropes of the *peplum* film. *Clash of the Titans*, *Wrath of the Titans*, and *Immortals* are essentially anti-allegorical texts in which the emphasis on action and spectacle predominates and there is little in their narratives which could be construed as a coherent allegory relevant to the period in which they were. One could perhaps interpret the texts as promoting free-will and individualism over divine-will and subservience, but as both mortals and immortals in the film reject and aid each other at various points the ultimate meaning of the films is confused. Similarly, the reiteration of the abandoned soldier-son and absent father-figure motif symbolic to the Vietnam War film has some bearing on these films, but rather than reflecting the pessimism of the Vietnam or Iraq combat films – or even the Roman-Britain epics – these mythological epics present reconciliation between fathers and sons by their denouement. Therefore, the films are closer to the model of the contemporary comic book movie than the combat film, Roman-Britain epics, or the Greek epics discussed in Chapter One. Nevertheless, the mythological epics have also proved the most financially viable of the cycle, illustrating Richard Maltby's argument that Hollywood

cinema is regularly ambiguous in its portrayal of political material to appeal to a wider audience who, in turn, are at liberty to create their own meanings from the text.[7]

The latter group of films exemplify the influence on the genre exerted by *300* and the hybridisation of the ancient world epic with the comic book movie. In analysing this cycle of ancient historical epics I have identified an original line of analysis, exploring the extent of genre hybridisation in the current cycle of ancient world epics and how it has influenced interpretations of these films. While in some cases, such as *300*'s basis on a graphic novel text, this hybridisation was evident from the beginning, in others it has only come to light over the course of my research. While some academic and critical texts have identified allusions to other genres or specific genre films in these epics, this study has expanded this area of enquiry to new areas. My findings have included the extensive influence of the western on the Roman-Britain epic, which depicts the Roman frontier in terms synonymous with that of the American frontier. In so doing, it also reveals how the works can be read as analogues for Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and America's frontier mythology, as each repeats similar features of characters coming from civilisation and encountering the dual threats of native and wilderness which offer a transformative experience through the motif of 'regeneration through violence'. Furthermore, the Roman epic utilises elements of the western – namely the archetypal hero, the native, and the dichotomies between civilisation and wilderness – to allegorical effect in criticising imperialist expansion at the expense of indigenous peoples and their culture. This use of the quintessential American genre and mythos also compensates for the films' expulsion of the conventional imagery of urban Rome in ancient world epics, which typically aids in depicting the city and its empire as an analogue for modern America through its associations with architecture, politics, and entertainment culture. Similarly, I have explored the appropriation of comic book iconography and symbolic stylisation in Snyder's *300* to illustrate the creation of myth and history through the role of the unreliable narrator. Furthermore, in identifying the influence of the horror film on *The Passion of the Christ* I have discussed how the film depicts the supernatural undercurrent and superhuman suffering endured by Jesus during the historical event of his Passion.

Most significantly, I have shown at length the influence of the combat film on the ancient world epic. In identifying the former's evolution prior to starting my analysis of

these epics, I was able to map the tropes and changes in the combat film onto the ancient world epic over the same period. The most substantial change in the combat film over the past twenty years has been the shift from the morally righteous, humanitarian interventionism of the US military in the 1990s and early 2000s combat film, into the victimised or immoral, objectiveless US military in the Iraq War period. The changes are embodied by the presence of the father figure in the former cycle, and the absent father and abandoned soldier-son in the latter. The Iraq and Afghanistan War films (as well as those depicting other conflicts produced alongside these films) resurrect the tropes of the 1980s Vietnam War combat film, and contribute to wider speculations made by some political, academic, and media commentators that Iraq and/or Afghanistan are repetitions of America's Vietnam experience. When one views the ancient world epics made across this period, we repeatedly see in their depiction of warfare martial protagonists operating in the absence of father figures, patriarchal institutions, or the general 'authorities' described by Aufderheide.[8] They therefore become victimised by the hostile environment in which they fight, and undergo a *katabatic* narrative in order to emerge with the knowledge to either reconcile with their absent fathers or to reject them and the corruption they symbolise.

Against the majority of anti-war sentiments expressed in these ancient world epics, *300* stands as an anomaly in which its eponymous heroes' gung-ho attitude, sculpted masculine forms, and martial prowess are glorified in the extreme. In this respect, the film recalls the right-wing wish-fulfilment fantasy of the 1980s Vietnam cycle, most notably embodied in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. The film's eponymous veteran has been described by Aufderheide as "the figure who paved the way for public acceptance of the noble grunt."[9] In *300*'s commercial success in America and its close affinity with the combat film, Snyder's epic has in turn influenced the combat film itself. This was first made evident in *The Hurt Locker* (2009), but has since found full form in *Lone Survivor* (2013) and *American Sniper* (2014). In these films, the protagonists are US servicemen in Iraq or Afghanistan who confront a faceless Eastern enemy wherein they perform their duty with ruthless skill and efficiency to either diffuse bombs or kill large numbers of the opposition. Indeed, *Lone Survivor* and *American Sniper* are comparable to *300* in their glorification of US military culture, the intense training recruits endure, and the abilities of the elite Special

Forces soldier. In so doing, *300*, *Lone Survivor* and *American Sniper* were all immense commercial successes in the US. In a future study, I would like to further explore this relationship between *300* and the combat film.

The current cycle of ancient world epics has also utilised a feature of the post-Iraq invasion combat film in the shape of the narrator. As discussed, a number of Iraq and Afghanistan War films featured a device Garrett Stewart calls "flashback as digital playback", wherein digital camera footage from phones, camcorders, helmet cameras, CCTV or similar sources would be played out to depict soldiers' memories of combat. This would often be tied to experiences of PTSD and could also run counter to official reports of events, such as in *Redacted*. In other combat films of this period, such as *Inglourious Basterds*, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, the theme of memory, recording events, and the utilisation of those recordings (such as in films, photographs, or propaganda) is prevalent throughout. This converges with the Iraq War films, in that the soldiers' memories/recordings offer their perspective on events which contradicts official reports, and reveals how appropriation of imagery or the use of propaganda can create an alternate, false or romanticised portrait of war. In *Troy*, *Alexander*, *300*, *King Arthur*, *Centurion*, and *The Last Legion* we see the use of (possibly unreliable) narrators who look back on events from their lives, consider how they will be remembered, and in some cases actively alter, revise, or construct events, depending on their purpose. While this may indeed by a further sign of the hybridisation of the combat film and ancient world epic, it could also be interpreted as an acknowledgement of historical films and their reputation for 'Hollywood history', 'factual inaccuracies', and changing events. *Gladiator* exemplified this in the sequence in which the Colosseum stages a reconstruction of the battle of Carthage. Maximus, one of the 'barbarians', rewrites history by defeating the 'Romans', and in so doing director Ridley Scott acknowledges his own changes to history in the name of dramatic licence and entertainment. *Gladiator* and many of the post-9/11 ancient world epics engage with the wider debate put forward by those such as Sorlin, Rosenstone, and Burgoyne concerning the value of historical films compared to written histories. Ultimately, both are constructed and can be influenced by personal or political sentiment, and in this respect many entries in the current cycle of ancient world epics engage with the history they depict and how it has been recorded throughout history.

I opened this thesis with a quote from Amelia Arenas, in which she proposed that ancient world epics are really "about ourselves, or, more precisely, about our ideals."[10] Over the course of this study I have shown that the genre is indeed a malleable construct which can be used to engage with the socio-political climate in which the films are produced. However, as this thesis has evidenced, the contemporary significance of these films are rarely specific to the period in which they are made, but rather embody larger, universal themes and concerns, such as freedom and slavery, imperialism, religion, and identity. The manner in which these films portray these issues can be regarded as revealing something about our ideals, but in the commercially-driven world of the film industry these are not always culture-specific. Nevertheless, the ancient world remains a 'usable past' to ruminate on past and present alike. Indeed, it is perhaps the continued relevance of the syntactic features of the ancient world epic that has inspired scholarship on the subject across the genre's many stages of evolution from the early 1900s to today. As discussed in the Introduction, a second wave of ancient world epics began in 2014. The research presented in this thesis will hopefully prove valuable for any subsequent analysis of these films and the genre at large. In this study, I have presented the first extensive look at the current cycle, explored their relationship to the social and political climate in which they were created, examined their relationship to the 1950s-60s cycle as well as to other genres, and considered how they have engaged with debates on historical films as history. In so doing this thesis has sought to contribute to notions of film as art, as industry, and as history, as they intersect in cinematic depictions of the ancient world.

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[1] David Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films* (New York and London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 79, 81.
[2] Jeff Smith, "Have You Now or Have You Ever Been A Christian? – The Strange History of *The Robe* as Political Allegory," in *'Un-American' Hollywood – Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, ed. Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 13.
[3] David Bordwell, "Observations on Film Art: Zip, Zero, Zeitgeist," *David Bordwell's Website On Cinema*, accessed July 18, 2015, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2014/08/24/zip-zero-zeitgeist/.
[4] "Hypatia, History and a Never-Ending Story," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 19, 2009, accessed April 23, 2014, http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/film/hypatia-history-and-a-neverending-story/2009/05/19/1242498745843.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1.
[5] Monica S. Cyrino, "'This Is Sparta!': The Reinvention of the Epic in Zack Snyder's *300*," In *The Epic Film in World Culture*, ed. Robert Burgoyne (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 27; Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper, *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 33.
[6] Andrew B. R. Elliott, introduction to *The Return of the Epic Film: Genre, Aesthetics and History in the 21st Century*, ed. Andrew B. R. Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 7.
[7] Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd. ed. (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 305.

[8] Pat Aufderheide, "Vietnam: Good Soldiers," in *Seeing Through Movies*, ed. Mark Crispin Miller (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 94.
[9] Ibid. 104-5.
[10] Amelia Arenas, "Popcorn and Circus: *Gladiator* and the Spectacle of Virtue." *Arion*, Third Series, 9. 1, (Spring-Summer, 2001): 8, accessed July 18, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163824.

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---. "Introduction by Ernest Borgnine," featured on *The Dirty Dozen*, directed by Robert Aldrich (1967; Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.

Dog Soldiers. Directed by Neil Marshall. 2002. Kismet Entertainment Group. UK, Luxembourg, USA.

Doomsday. Directed by Neil Marshall. 2008. Rogue Pictures. UK, USA, South Africa, Germany.

The Doors. Directed by Oliver Stone. 1991. Bill Graham Films. USA.

The Eagle. Directed by Kevin MacDonald. 2011. Focus Features. UK, USA, Hungary.

The Eagle of the Ninth. Directed by Michael Simpson and Baz Taylor. 1977. BBC. UK. (TV Series – BFI Archive).

El Cid. Directed by Anthony Mann. 1961. Samuel Bronston Productions. Italy, USA.

Enemy Mine. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. 1985. 20th Century Fox. USA, West Germany.

Exodus: Gods and Kings. Directed by Ridley Scott. 2014. Chernin Entertainment. UK, USA, Spain.

The Exorcist. Directed by William Friedkin. 1973. Warner Bros. USA.

Fahrenheit 9/11. Directed by Michael Moore. 2004. Fellowship Adventure Group. USA.

The Fall of the Roman Empire. Directed by Anthony Mann. 1964. Samuel Bronston Productions. USA.

First Blood. Directed by Ted Kotcheff. 1982. Anabasis N.V. USA.

First Knight. Directed by Jerry Zucker. 1995. Columbia Pictures Corporation. USA.

Flags of Our Fathers. Directed by Clint Eastwood. 2006. Dreamworks SKG. USA.

Full Metal Jacket. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. 1987. Natant. UK, USA.

Gladiator. Directed by Ridley Scott. 2000. Dreamworks SKG. USA, UK.

The Gorgon. Directed by Terence Fisher. 1964. Hammer. UK.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew. Directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. 1964. Arco Film. Italy, France.

The Greatest Story Ever Told. Directed by George Stevens. 1965. George Stevens Productions. USA.

The Great Train Robbery. Directed by Edwin S. Porter. 1903. Edison Manufacturing Company. USA.

The Green Berets. Directed by Ray Kellogg and John Wayne. 1968. Batjac Productions. USA.

Grey's Anatomy. Directed by Rob Corn et al. 2005-. Shondaland. USA. (TV Series)

Hamburger Hill. Directed by John Irvin. 1987. RKO Pictures. USA.

Helen of Troy. Directed by Robert Wise. 1956. Warner Bros. USA, Italy, France.

Hercules. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. 1997. Walt Disney Pictures. USA.

Hercules. Directed by Lewis Coates. 1983. Cannon Italia Srl. USA, Italy.

Hercules. Directed by Brett Ratner. 2014. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Hercules Conquers Atlantis. Directed by Vittorio Cottafavi. 1961. Comptoir Français du Film Production. Italy, France.

Hercules: The Legendary Journeys. Directed by Bruce Campbell et al. 1995-1999. MCA Television. USA, New Zealand. (TV Series)

Hostel. Directed by Eli Roth. 2005. Hostel LLC. USA, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Iceland.

The Hurt Locker. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow. 2009. Voltage Pictures. USA.

Immortals. Directed by Tarsem Singh. 2011. Relativity Media. USA.

Inglourious Basterds. Directed by Quentin Tarantino. 2009. Universal Pictures. USA, Germany.

In the Valley of Elah. Directed by Paul Haggis. 2007. Warner Independent Pictures. USA.

Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages. Directed by D.W. Griffith. 1916. Triangle Film Corporation. USA.

Iron Man. Directed by Jon Favreau. 2008. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Iron Man 2. Directed by Jon Favreau. 2010. Paramount Pictures. USA.

I Spit On Your Grave. Directed by Steven R. Monroe. 2010. Cinetel Films. USA.

Jason and the Argonauts. Directed by Don Chaffey. 1963. Columbia Pictures Corporation. UK, USA.

JFK. Directed by Oliver Stone. 1991. Warner Bros. France, USA.

King Arthur. Directed by Antoine Fuqua. 2004. Touchstone Pictures. USA, UK, Ireland.

The Kingdom. Directed by Peter Berg. 2007. Universal Pictures. USA, Germany.

Kingdom of Heaven. Directed by Ridley Scott. 2005. 20th Century Fox. USA, UK, Spain, Germany, Morocco.

The King of Kings. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. 1927. DeMille Pictures Corporation. USA.

King of Kings. Directed by Nicholas Ray. 1961. MGM. USA.

The Last Legion. Directed by Doug Lefler. 2007. Dino De Laurentiis Company. UK, Italy, France, Tunisia.

The Last Samurai. Directed by Edward Zwick. 2003. Warner Bros. USA, New Zealand, Japan.

The Last Temptation of Christ. Directed by Martin Scorsese. 1988. Universal Pictures. USA, Canada.

The Legend of Hercules. Directed by Renny Harlin. 2014. Millennium Films. USA.

Lethal Weapon. Directed by Richard Donner. 1987. Warner Bros. USA.

Letters from Iwo Jima. Directed by Clint Eastwood. 2006. Dreamworks SKG. USA.

Little Big Man. Directed by Arthur Penn. 1970. Cinema Center Films. USA.

Lone Survivor. Directed by Peter Berg. 2013. Film 44. USA.

The Longest Day. Directed by Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Bernhard Wicki, and Gerd Oswald. 1962. Darryl F. Zanuck Productions. USA.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring. Directed by Peter Jackson. 2001. New Line Cinema. New Zealand, USA.

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. Directed by Peter Jackson. 2002. New Line Cinema. New Zealand, USA.

The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. Directed by Peter Jackson. 2003. New Line Cinema. New Zealand, USA.

Masada. Directed by Boris Sagal. 1981. Arnon Milchan Productions. USA. (TV series)

The Magnificent Seven. Directed by John Sturges. 1960. Mirisch Company. USA.

Man on Fire. Directed by Tony Scott. 2004. Fox 2000 Pictures. USA, UK.

*M*A*S*H*. Directed by Robert Altman. 1970. Aspen Productions. USA.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World. Directed by Peter Weir. 2003. 20th Century Fox. USA.

The Mist. Directed by Frank Darabont. 2007. Dimension Films. USA.

Monty Python's Life of Brian. Directed by Terry Jones. 1979. HandMade Films. UK.

Nixon. Directed by Oliver Stone. 1995. Cinergi Pictures Entertainment. USA.

Noah. Directed by Darren Aronofsky. 2014. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Objective, Burma! Directed by Raoul Walsh. 1945. Warner Bros. USA.

The Omen. Directed by Richard Donner. 1976. 20th Century Fox. USA, UK.

The Pacific. Directed by Jeremy Podeswa et al. 2010. Dreamworks SKG. USA, Australia. (TV Series)

The Passion of Joan of Arc. Directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer. 1928. Société générale des films. France.

The Passion of the Christ. Directed by Mel Gibson. 2004. Icon Productions. USA.

Patton. Directed by Franklin J. Schaffner. 1970. 20th Century Fox. USA.

Payback. Directed by Brian Helgeland. 1999. Icon Entertainment International. USA.

The Perfect Storm. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. 2000. Warner Bros. USA.

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl. Directed by Gore Verbinkski. 2003. Walk Disney Pictures. USA.

Platoon. Directed by Oliver Stone. 1986. Hemdale Film. UK, USA.

The Private Life of Helen of Troy. Directed by Alexander Korda. 1927. First National Pictures. USA.

The Professionals. Directed by Richard Brooks. 1966. Pax Enterprises. USA.

Quo Vadis. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. 1951. MGM. USA, Italy.

Rambo: First Blood Part II. Directed by George P. Cosmatos. 1985. Anabasis N.V. USA.

Redacted. Directed by Brian De Palma. 2007. Film Farm. USA, Canada.

Rendition. Directed by Gavin Hood. 2007. Anonymous Content. USA.

Ride the High Country. Directed by Sam Peckinpah. 1962. MGM. USA.

The Robe. Directed by Henry Koster. 1953. 20th Century Fox. USA.

Rome. Directed by Michael Apted et al. 2005-7. HD Vision Studios. UK, USA. (TV Series)

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski. 1968. William Castle Productions. USA.

The Ruins. Directed by Carter Smith. 2008. Dreamworks SKG. USA, Germany, Australia.

Samson and Delilah. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. 1949. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Sands of Iwo Jima. Directed by Allan Dwan. 1949. Republic Pictures. USA.

Saving Private Ryan. Directed by Steven Spielberg. 1998. Dreamworks SKG. USA.

Saw. Directed by James Wan. 2004. Evolution Entertainment. USA, Australia.

Schindler's List. Directed by Steven Spielberg. 1993. Universal Pictures. USA.

Scipione l'Africano. Directed by Carmine Gallone. 1937. Consorzione 'Scipio l'Africano'. Italy.

The Searchers. Directed by John Ford. 1956. Warner Bros. USA.

Seven Samurai. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1954. Toho Company. Japan.

She. Directed by Robert Day. 1965. Hammer. UK.

She Wore A Yellow Ribbon. Directed by John Ford. 1949. Argosy Pictures. USA.

The Sign of the Cross. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. 1932. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Signs. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan. 2002. Touchstone Pictures. USA.

Sin City. Directed by Robert Rodriquez and Frank Miller. 2005. Dimension Films. USA.

Soldier Blue. Directed by Ralph Nelson. 1970. AVCO Embassy Pictures. USA.

Spartacus. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. 1960. Bryna Productions. USA.

Spartacus. Directed by Jesse Warn et al. 2010-2013. Starz Media. USA.

Star Wars. Directed by George Lucas. 1977. Lucasfilm. USA.

Stop-Loss. Directed by Kimberly Peirce. 2008. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Strike. Directed by Sergei Eisenstein. 1925. Goskino. Soviet Union (Russia).

Syriana. Directed by Steven Gaghan. 2005. Warner Bros. USA, United Arab Emirates.

Taken. Directed by Pierre Morel. 2008. EuropaCorp. France.

Tears of the Sun. Directed by Antoine Fuqua. 2003. Cheyenne Enterprises. USA.

The Ten Commandments. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. 1956. Paramount Pictures. USA.

The Ten Commandments. Directed by Cecil B. DeMille. 1923. Paramount Pictures. USA.

They Died With Their Boots On. Directed by Raoul Walsh. 1941. Warner Bros. USA.

Thor. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. 2011. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Titanic. Directed by James Cameron. 1997. 20th Century Fox. USA.

Troy. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. 2004. Warner Bros. USA, Malta, UK.

True Grit. Directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. 2010. Paramount Pictures. USA.

Ulzana's Raid. Directed by Robert Aldrich. 1972. Universal Pictures. USA.

The Untold History of the United States. Directed by Oliver Stone. 2012. Ixtlan Productions. USA. (TV Series)

The Viking Queen. Directed by Don Chaffey. 1967. Hammer. UK.

W. Directed by Oliver Stone. 2008. Lionsgate. USA, Australia, Hong Kong, Switzerland, China.

Watchmen. Directed by Zack Snyder. 2009. Warner Bros. USA.

Wall Street. Directed by Oliver Stone. 1987. 20th Century Fox. USA.

Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps. Directed by Oliver Stone. 2010. 20th Century Fox. USA.

We Were Soldiers. Directed by Randall Wallace. 2002. Icon Entertainment International. USA, Germany.

The Wild Bunch. Directed by Sam Peckinpah. 1969. Warner Bros. USA.

Winchester '73. Directed by Anthony Mann. 1950. Universal International Pictures. USA.

The Wire. Directed by Joe Chappelle et al. 2002-2008. Blown Deadline Productions. USA. (TV Series)

Wolf Creek. Directed by Greg McLean. 2005. Australian Film Finance Corporation. Australia.

Wrath of the Titans. Directed by Jonathan Liebesman. 2012. Warner Bros. USA, Spain.

Xena: Warrior Princess. Directed by Garth Maxwell et al. 1995-2001. MCA Television. New Zealand. (TV Series)