



Ivo Blom, *Quo vadis?, Cabiria, and the 'Archaeologists': Early Cinema's Appropriation of Art and Archaeology* (La favilla, la vampa, la cenere. Nuove ricerche sul cinema muto italiano), Turin: Edizioni Kaplan, 2023, 310 pp., 138 b/w and col. ills, ISBN 978-88-99559-66-3, €40

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Numerous early Italian silent movies visualized themes from the ancient world, especially the Roman Empire, seen as the predecessor of the young modern Reign of Italy. The narratives derived from novels and historical accounts, as well as some scripts, were written by famous authors. The explanatory intertexts could easily be translated into English, French and other languages, so these early films rapidly gained a wide audience in Europe and America. One of the problems the makers had to solve was the setting of these stories in stages which did justice to the narrative and conveyed a trustworthy image of antiquity. Ivo Blom, a great expert in the field of Italian cinema from its infancy to modern times, has made this question the central theme of his latest book. From the outset he makes clear that we are dealing with *intermediality*, the reciprocal influence of different media, and *transnationality*, the spread of both films and sources over various countries. The paintings of artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme and Lawrence Alma Tadema are relevant as sources of inspiration; and an exhibition on Tadema in Leeuwarden, Vienna and London in 2016–2017 included a show of fragments of early twentieth-century productions in which the visitor recognized elements eternalized on Tadema's canvases, collected here by Blom. Along with these monumental art works, prints, lantern slides and illustrated editions of historical novels, such as numerous versions of Henryk Sienkiewicz' *Quo vadis* of 1896, served as material.

Chapter 1 explores the transformation of a painted image, say a historical painting like Gérôme's *Pollice verso*, into a moving representation, a 'living picture' or 'tableau animé' (pp. 31–2). Short film tracks showed a sort of narrative introduction and finished with a tableau vivant (see figs 34–6: Guazzoni's 1911 *The Bride of the Nile* and its source, a painting by Faruffini of 1865). The costumes and setting recalled the original work of art. Even after Gérôme's work lost momentum around 1900, the

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film makers still embraced his cruel representations of Roman 'life', thanks to the influence he had on Italian Neo-Pompeians like Domenico Morelli and Francesco Netti, and the thematic which encouraged the young Italian state to resurrect itself like the valiant ancient Romans. Blom makes clear that the stratigraphy of sources (to use an archaeological term) is more complex: not the (forgotten) painting itself, but rather adaptations of it were instrumental. One is that of theatre representations which, as Blom demonstrates, dominated the international stages during the first decade of the twentieth century. Together with that higher form of artistry, there are figural reproductions and adaptations of low and high level, copiously illustrated in the text. As an example, Blom analyses the work of Enrico Guazzoni, who himself was trained as a painter. He claimed authenticity in his visualization of the past and was praised for that. In his 1913 *Quo vadis?*, film stills of the actions in the amphitheatre exactly repeat Gérôme's canvases or their reproductions and underline the artists' fascination for Roman cruelty next to manliness. Finally, Blom explores the possibility of Gérôme's work as a prequel of cinema, in that these paintings represent a sequence of moments within one image in what I, as a classical archaeologist, would call *narratio continua*, but pointing at the early film as pictures in motion, he warns against a simplification of such a kind of 'parallax historiography' (p. 96).

Chapter 2 focusses on Alma Tadema and Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?*, which, at first sight, looks less obvious, since Tadema did not make representations of action and cruelty like Gérôme, but rather explored the 'soft cell' of Roman civilization. The generally made claim that Tadema's work was instrumental is explored systematically through a fine analysis of intermediate sources like publications on Tadema in the Italian press and literature. So, Gabriele D'Annunzio praised Tadema's sense of poetry and representation of human emotions similar to modern life (p. 121). Again, reproductions (e.g. *photogravures* made in collaboration with the artist) formed a second category, and theatre was the third method of transfer. Tadema had contributed sets, props and costumes to productions in London with an 'archaeological rigour' (p. 130), which stunned theatre makers and public alike. Apparently, Guazzoni was inspired by Tadema's *mise-en-scène* of his figures within the canvases' environment (viz., 'deep staging', p. 159), his costumes and props, and – no less fundamental – the pictures' atmosphere. Blom works out which pieces of furniture were in both Tadema's paintings and in early Italian films (not only Guazzoni's), where another source might be finds from Pompeii available to the film makers and pieces shown in an important 1911 exhibition in Rome. These faithful props remained in use in subsequent productions of the 1910s 'as if the whole of antiquity was one big IKEA store' (p. 153).

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to Giovanni Pastrone's masterpiece *Cabiria* from 1914, in which the clash between an Orientalized Carthage and Westernized Rome reflects the contemporary attempts to (re-)conquer parts of northern Africa and Italy's ambition to enhance its power and prestige. D'Annunzio was instrumental by writing the intertitles (e.g. p. 186); and the work impressed the audience thanks to its combination of intimate scenes featuring 'femmes fatales' like Cabiria and Sofonisba, and mass performances in battles and atrocious offerings to Moloch. They constitute the same elements Gustave Flaubert had used in his 1862 novel *Salammbô*, part of the basic dossier for the film thanks to the – late – Italian translation

of 1905. An important visual source was Henri-Paul Motte's now forgotten (and partly lost) Oriental paintings known through reproductions. Motte was called 'the tireless palaeontologist of pre-Christian civilisations' (p. 184). Illustrated editions of *Salammô*, all posthumous since Flaubert disliked the *illustrés*, served as further figural sources. Blom gives a fine overview of Flaubert's reception in the late nineteenth century – paintings and operas, especially that of Ernest Reyer of 1890 – as a link to Pastrone's film. Blom singles out George-Antoine Rochegrosse's illustration for a luxurious 1900 edition and evidences the strong iconographic and stylistic correspondences between book and film. Chapter 4 brings the reader to a series of observations on archaeological sources, completely justifying the discipline's mention in the book title. Pastrone and D'Annunzio knew and studied the 'Punic' collection in the Louvre as well as other Oriental objects there and in the Museo Egizio in Turin. Since 'Punic art' was, and partly is, not well defined, we find quotations from Egyptian and Assyrian civilizations as well as the Celto-Iberic Dama di Elche (fig. 111) to construct Cabiria's headgear. Blom has detected the scientific and popular publications Pastrone used (partly stored in 'sub-archives' [p. 235] in the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin; see fig. 98). The blend of cultures in the film's artefacts reflects the contemporary idea that Punic Carthage was a hybrid town. For the famous Moloch, Blom has found an Assyrian statuette in the Louvre as a source (p. 249, fig. 113), whereas there are numerous references to Egyptian art in the Louvre and the Egyptian Museum in Turin.

In his conclusion, Blom brings together the results of his wide-ranging and thorough-going research and makes a plea for further exploration of the notion of transnationalism (p. 286): the early Italian historical films make use of a complex international dossier of data and show how their makers contacted experts from Italy and beyond. He also sketches further research topics and opens avenues to analysing modern colossals like Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* of 2000, mentioned a couple of times. Recently, Scott has answered critics of his *Napoleon* of 2023 by saying that history is less important than atmosphere. He might have said with Flaubert, 'je me moque de l'archéologie', but both have erected monuments full of antique references just like the cinema makers for whom Blom has erected a fine monument.

Blom writes in a vivid and accessible style and inserts glimpses of his own experiences and research history into the debates and discussions. The many illustrations form a fine apparatus of sources and include rare objects in the author's possession. Typos are rare, but some references to figures and their captions are confusing (pp. 238–42 with figs 104–9). The *sella curricula* at p. 274 should be the *sella curulis*, a distinction of Roman magistrates. But these are small quibbles about a book I cannot but recommend to cinephiles and lovers of reception studies concerning Greco-Roman archaeology.