

**Ivo Blom, *Quo Vadis?, Cabiria and the 'Archaeologists': Early Italian Cinema's Appropriation of Art and Archaeology*. Turin: Edizione Kaplan, 2023, 312 pp.**

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With the addition of *Quo Vadis?, Cabiria and the 'Archaeologists': Early Italian Cinema's Appropriation of Art and Archaeology*, Ivo Blom extends his expansive corpus of work on film history, intermediality and antiquity on screen. This welcome monograph builds significantly on his previous research into two landmark films of early Italian cinema. Blom devotes two of the monograph's four main chapters to Giovanni Pastrone's *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914) respectively, focusing on how the visual arts and archaeology were used within Italian cinema of the 1910s to produce these internationally significant and influential epics set in antiquity. The author explores the significance of the French artist Jean-Léon Gérôme and the Anglo-Dutch Lawrence Alma-Tadema, whose painterly inspirations for *Quo Vadis?* and, more recently, *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), are well documented (including by Blom himself). However, he also calls attention to the lesser-known French "archaeologist" painters' (p. 8), Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse and Henri-Paul Motte, whose importance was uncovered in his research on *Cabiria*.

The book is sumptuously illustrated throughout, with an impressive 138 images, mostly full colour or tinted, that range from paintings, postcards, engravings and archival photographs of ancient artefacts to film stills, posters and historical publications. Published with the support of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Turin, the work fittingly inhabits the space between illustrated museum catalogue, deeply scholarly academic text and (if it were a little larger) tempting coffee-table book. As Blom notes, this enterprise is the product of decades of work, and while some of the material has been previously published in other forms (Chapter 1 is a version of a 2001 essay, for example), it has been updated and expanded to incorporate new research and take it into original directions, a process upon which the author is consistently reflexive. In this way the structure of the book formalizes an awareness of argument through each chapter's opening 'lead' (in addition to its introduction), which details key questions, while the debates are neatly summarized in the conclusion.

Blom's research is vigorously contextualized within fields relating to early Italian cinema, classical reception studies, and visual culture and intermediality, and the book is particularly enlightening on the process of researching the past itself. Notable in this capacity are Blom's own endeavours – his acknowledgements show a network of academic contacts at various international institutions and archives that have enabled him to synthesise the wealth of sources explored in the book,

assisting their dissemination through exhibitions and screenings relating to the artists and films discussed. However, the collaborative nature of this research is perhaps most evident in the chapter that traces the iconography of *Cabiria* in archaeology and museums. Here the process of uncovering how the filmmakers did (and did not) use the Louvre Museum in Paris and the Museo Egiptio of Turin as a resource for their representations of Punic and Phoenician culture in matters of set design, props, and so on, echoes the collaborative journey of the author himself, aided by curators, as he recreates a picture of the collections and architectural layouts of the museums. This fleshes out the ‘horizon of expectation’, as Blom puts it with reference to Jauss;<sup>1</sup> the array of museum objects, paintings and literary sources that were available to Pastrone and others at the time, and which accordingly established ‘a new vocabulary of set and costume design for historical cinema, blending history and fantasy’ (p. 9). Moreover, Blom indicates that it was often not only a question of the direct impact of particular paintings, such as Gérôme’s ubiquitous *Pollice Verso*, but also the indirect influence of reproductions and illustrations, something that is much harder to quantify but is meticulously examined in this work. The book really comes into its own here; this kind of research is a labour of love that requires time spent in the archive and a deep knowledge and sympathy for the period. In its reflexivity in approach, Blom’s book is equally as instructive about academic historical enquiry and the sources available to the researcher as it is about a parallel history where many of those sources were also pursued within an industrial representational method deployed by these early filmmakers. Similarly revealing of the author’s processes are the exhaustive footnotes that loom large at the bottom of each page (alas, there is no bibliography), a parallel conversation attesting to the diligence of the research itself but also indicating avenues for future enquiry.

The recent reception of Ridley Scott’s *Napoleon* (2023) indicates that debate around accuracy and authenticity in historical cinema remains as pertinent as ever, with film continuing to function as a kind of palimpsest, that for all its novelty still bears traces of prior representations and receptions we are perhaps meant to notice. Blom demonstrates that in establishing a template for an archaeologically informed yet flexible and audience-pleasing representation of the past, *Quo Vadis?* and *Cabiria* produced ‘a new hybrid vision of cinema’ (p. 286). These films present ‘layered visions of the past’ (p. 284), filtered through centuries of reception and contemporary re-framings. In following the traces of the past, Blom takes pains to question the nature of the proto-cinematic and to avoid making assumptions about the influence of individual artworks, given their present cultural familiarity. In method he takes inspiration from Ágnes Pethő’s notion of a ‘cinema of *in-betweenness*’, where intermediality is present as ‘an ever-changing aesthetic configuration, and a sensuously perceivable excess’ (p. 45).<sup>2</sup> The cinema that emerges through Blom’s study is deeply transnational

1 Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Literary history as a challenge to literary theory’, in *Toward an Aesthetic of Receptions* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 18–19.

2 Quoting from Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The*

*Passion for the In-Between*  
(Newcastle upon Tyne:  
Cambridge Scholars Publishing,  
2020), p. 45.

and transmedial in nature, where art and artefacts are not present as passive quotes but are active agents in producing meaning for the audience. This book makes for a fascinating read.

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