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Pompeii in Film



Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei (Luigi Maggi, 1908)

The treatment of the story follows Bulwer-Lytton’s novel closely. It visualizes historical romance... It is antiquity re-enacted in the Twentieth Century ... The destruction of Pompeii is far more impressive in film than in books
G. Kleine (Wyke 1997, 148)

The prominent place Pompeii occupies in the imagination of Western and world culture is widely confirmed by the cinema. It is one of the subjects from the ancient world most frequently dealt with and periodically revisited down to the present. The Roman city made its appearance on screen at the dawn of the history of cinema. In 1900 Walter R. Booth made a five-minute film, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which reconstructed the city’s destruction as a punishment for pagan sinners. But interest in the subject was not the result of a casual idea, nor even a fad. It was born in the eighteenth century and grew exponentially during the nineteenth, considered the Century of History. The first treatment of it was a forerunner of historical fiction set in the ancient world, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Its impact was such that it became a point of reference for the treatment of antiquity in twentieth-century cinema, even more than two other prominent novels of the century: *Ben-Hur* (1880) by Lewis Wallace and *Quo Vadis?* (1895) by Henryk Sienkiewicz.

Bulwer-Lytton set his novel in the days leading up to the great eruption of 79 AD with a collection of imaginary Greek, Roman and Egyptian characters. Their characterization reflects the contemporary clichés of these three cultures: the admiration for ancient Greece, which turns the youthful heroes of the story, Glaucus and Ione, into Hellenes; the decadence of the Roman world, presaging its final punishment; and mistrust of the East, embodied in the treacherous methods and intentions of Arbaces, a priest of Isis. But the most obvious anachronism is the prominence place given to Christianity, which did not exist in Pompeii at the time yet leaves its mark on the novel, with the eruption of Vesuvius represented as divine punishment for paganism. The novel grew out of Bulwer Lytton’s admiration for the city, stemming from a trip to Italy in the tradition of the Grand Tour, and its success aroused a fascination among readers for the great catastrophe of antiquity. This is hardly surprising, since in the Roman world Pliny the Elder himself lost his life thanks to the fascination he felt for such a spectacular phenomenon. The novel helped popularize this stage of the cultural initiatory journey to Italy, following this model of admiration for the destruction; and cinema, a supremely twentieth-century form, completed the democratization of the image of Pompeii associated with the interweaving of individual experiences suddenly buried and permanently sealed by the violent eruption. On the path linking the novel to the film one finds a series of milestones that establish a continuous connection between them and that provide a repertoire of figurative contents used in the film. And the way the stories were turned into images, the new historical product of the twentieth century, would

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continue to appear pervaded by conditionings peculiar to the age, which can be perceived by passing in review the most important film versions featuring the city of Pompeii, made roughly in the first four decades of the century: *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (L. Maggi, 1908), *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (E. Rodolfi, 1913), *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (A. Palermi and C. Gallone, 1926) and *The Last Days of Pompeii* (E.B. Schoedsack, 1935).

The Italian film industry produced its first experiment with the ancient world in 1908, with the film *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (The Last Days of Pompeii), produced by the Turin-based production house Ambrosio and directed by Luigi Maggi. It is an adaptation of Bulwer-Lytton's famous novel, though there existed purely Italian literary and operatic references in the nineteenth century. The story had to be sharply cut, because of its length and the limitations of film as a medium at that time, with productions having an average running time of eight minutes. However, this film made the effort to achieve twice the usual running time, nineteen minutes. The plot, of some complexity, has the unusual distinction of having five protagonists, who are clearly identified with a framed presentation of each of them. A significant feature is the elimination of any allusion to Christianity and to a lesser extent the deliberate suppression of the exaltation of the Greek world through the couple Glauco and Jone, as compared with the decadence of the Roman world. However, the detrimental features of Arbace, the priest of Isis, are retained. The outcome is an exposition divided into sixteen tableaux, as in the theater, with different scenes in which actors and extras appear. Among the sites represented there are some of the city's emblematic places, such as the Forum, the Temple of Isis, the amphitheater or a city street, together with others such as the interiors of homes, a tavern and natural spaces.

This first narrative film set in the ancient world fixed the principal codes of representation that would then be associated with antiquity (Aubert 2009, 126). They are the direct heirs of the aesthetic components of the previous century, distinguished by the constant evocation of monumental architecture and the profusion of vegetation. A striking feature from the very first scene is the abundant presence of white marble columns, a color that also pervades the clothes of actors and extras. By contrast, a somber quality suffuses everything related to the character of Arbace: the temple of Isis, his characterization and his clothing. Similarly, a clear distinction is drawn between the opulent mansions with sumptuous furnishings and the interior decor of modest places like the tavern. But first of all, there exists one constant common to almost all the scenes, and this is the essential positioning of an element of unmistakable classical attribution, as is the case of some statues. The models for structural and decorative elements are mainly paintings, but also archaeological finds. At the same time, one notes the need for exuberant vegetation: ivy climbs over the built surfaces and garlands are interwoven between the columns. Even the character of Nidia, blindly enamored of Glauco, is a flower-seller, who eventually dies in a bed of flowers with clear Pre-Raphaelites overtones.

Following the success it gained in Italy and worldwide, this film led to the cinematographic crystallization of a whole series of stereotypes of antiquity, inherited from the literature and painting of the previous decades, which provided an essential frame of reference for reconstructions of the ancient world.

After this international success of the Italian film industry, in 1913 the production of three new film versions was announced, outstanding among them *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (The Last Days of Pompeii), which was again produced by Ambrosio and directed by Eleuterio Rodolfi. Great technical advances had been made by the cinema in the five years since the previous version, making possible significant and appreciable innovations in both new technical potential and in the grammar of film, materialized in the capacity to create a production lasting over an hour and a half. The film contains 125 scenes, with a hundred intercalated captions (Aubert 2009, 127). The movements of the camera allowed greater proximity to the actors and the redefinition of the filmed space, and the use of montage made it possible to construct the narrative with alternating fields and reverse shots.



Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei (Eleuterio Rodolfi, 1913)

The codes for representing antiquity were already established in the previous film: monumentality, decoration, vegetation and garments. Yet further developments were registered thanks to the new potential offered by the filming technique. It represents stairs, columns or podia in abundance, but the buildings are not necessarily of white marble. Other kinds of stone are also used; the vegetation continues to be luxuriant, without reaching the level of its previous exuberance; even the range of colors of the clothing is extended to light colors, close to the previously ubiquitous white. It also retains most of the thematic adaptations of the English novel used in the other films, although with some distinctive departures. In the plot, the opposition between emerging Christianity and pagan impiety, leading inevitably to the eruption to punish the wicked, was still veiled, and the Greek origin of young Jone was omitted. However, the characteristics of the wicked priest of Isis remain and are emphasized. This character embodies the various stereotypes of the Oriental in the period. He is dark-skinned, mendacious, immoral, primitive and lascivious. This whole model of virtue is reinforced by the longer temporal development devoted to the ceremonies of the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis, by which Arbace seeks to dupe the innocent and unwary young Roman. However, all the conflicts are resolved before the eruption, so that Vesuvius becomes the actor who sanctions what has already been resolved. In this film the commonplace of associating the ancient world with more permissive manners than the present also makes its appearance. To recreate a period like antiquity, when the statues exhibited their nakedness and public baths were an indispensable part of life in towns, the filmmakers saw themselves as *obliged* to take liberties that went beyond the limits set by coeval modesty. The costumes of the actresses were flimsier; love scenes could be freer and above all they represented private or public situations, highlighting not only the erotic aspect, but also the exoticism of some practices distant from the current customs. This association of antiquity with greater erotic permissiveness became a feature of subsequent films.

In the twenties feature-length films had already become common. Moreover the Italian film industry had been suffering from a crisis that began at the end

of WWI. In this context an attempt was made to rehabilitate the national production, which had serious competitors in Germany and especially from across the Atlantic in Hollywood. To find an appropriate vehicle, filmmakers turned to *romanità* (the Roman world), which had previously yielded excellent results in the Italian cinema. But this was not a period for flaunting technique; the nature and duration of productions were directly influenced by the resources available. And to achieve the goal it was necessary to develop a colossal, a long movie with a great deployment of means and magnificent scenery. Amleto Palermi and Carmine Gallone went into partnership with the producer Ambrosio, responsible for the two previous successes, to create the Grandifilms production house and embarked on the adventure of yet another adaptation of Bulwer-Lytton's novel, with the hope of reviving the wistfully remembered successes of the past. In this way a new version of *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* was filmed in 1926. Having exhausted their resources, the producers were forced to turn to Germany and Austria in search of additional funding. The partners enforced a number of conditions, including hiring actors who commanded very high signing fees, which significantly increased the final cost. The film was physically colossal, a production with over a thousand scenes and two hundred captions, with a running time of two and a half hours. In making this superproduction the script closely followed the plotlines of the original novel, articulated by the opposition between the decadent and cunning pagans and the emerging and upright Christians. The film is populated by a crowd of characters present in the novel. Salvation is the prize for the heroes Glaucus and Ione, on a personal basis, while on a collective basis the redeemed are Christians. At the other extreme is the quintessence of evil embodied by the already well-known Arbaces, the Egyptian priest of Isis, and Calenus, the evil Roman whose task is to procure women for the priest's orgies. The representation of this theme in images offered an opportunity to give a free rein to the imagination and allowed the filmmakers an unusual degree of freedom, why they put to good use. Early in the film, the viewers see a reconstruction of the baths at Stabiae, which not only show women bathing, with various parts of their bodies uncovered, but also partial male nudes. In fact, in the following sequence we are presented with the celebration of an initiatory ritual in the temple of Isis, which goes beyond the previous limits. Surprisingly, the censorship at the time did not suppress such risky scenes, but the explanation is to be found in the moralistic interpretation of the filmic narrative: on the one hand these scenes are meant to show the customs of degenerate Rome, while on the other we infer that those wicked practices cried out for punishment by Vesuvius. It implies that a city with such pagan cults, depraved habits and idle way of life, populated by decadent, effeminate and cruel characters, could hardly survive; it was doomed to succumb, being transformed by pure love and the Christian religion.

At the same time, the film's great ambitions made it masterly in all that touched on archeological scholarship. It started from the appearance of the archeological remains then visible, and then proceeded to reconstruct the city's original appearance. In this way viewers could observe the state of the excavations in the 1920s (with Via dell'Abbondanza, the Forum, the temple of Isis, the amphitheater and the baths), followed by the image of the Forum reconstructed and thronged with people. In order to display its scholarly credentials it evoked the authority of Amedeo Maiuri, then in charge of the excavations, for the reconstructions of buildings like the Forum or the Basilica. And it also drew on the advice of professionals experienced in working with classical antiquity, using excellent quality reproductions of materials and objects from Pompeii, such as trays, statues, urns, pottery, jewelry and paintings. Despite all this, the film's financial failure in Italy and abroad was so great that some people renamed it "the last days of the Italian cinema" (Iaccio 2009, 78). The explanation must be sought in the absence of innovative filmic ideas in this ambitious work, but above it was bound up with the articulation of a discourse which explicitly referenced political themes in the period, a consequence of the exaltation and distortion of nationalism after Mussolini came to power.

Nine years later, in 1935, a new project with the same title was undertaken, this time on the other side of the Atlantic. *The Last Days of Pompeii* had little in common



Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei
(Amleto Palermi and Carmine Gallone, 1926)

with the novel from which it took its name, only the title, the narration partly set in the city and the eruption of Vesuvius. Everything else was the result of a makeover of the plot, the characters and adaptation to the needs of the Hollywood film industry. The project was promoted by RKO, which was well aware of the fact that the general public's interests in the United States had nothing to do with the Italian resonances of a glorious past or identification with European classical aesthetic models, or even admiration for the ever more conspicuous archeological finds. In the film, the only interest in history is concentrated in the particular focus on two physical buildings: the amphitheater and the Temple of Jupiter in the Forum. The question that really appealed to potential viewers was the catastrophe that had buried the city in ancient times. The finale of the story was combined with another theme common to the novel, the centrality of Christianity as an engine of the great renewal experienced by the Roman world. But this was not represented as a new faith opposed to paganism with an Oriental matrix or the moral decadence of a depraved city. The plot offered to viewers focused on revelation as experienced by an individual, who after suffering from a series of unjustified misfortunes, makes it his principal concern to amass easy riches, although he never goes so far as to abandon the concept of family responsibility, leading to his final redemption after discovering the truth of the new religion. During his lifetime he adopts the son of a fellow gladiator who has died, a follower of Christianity, who eventually persuades him of the truth of his faith. As has been observed, the story has nothing to do with the novel by Bulwer-Lytton. Rather it can be seen, according to M. Wyke, as having clear affinities with gangster movies and a metaphorical reaffirmation of American liberties in the face of the decadence of Europe (Wyke 1997, 174-175).

From the end of World War II to the present, movies have continued to be made about Pompeii, its everyday life and catastrophic destiny. Reflecting the fascination that continues to surround such an extraordinary city, they are increasingly less influenced by the eighteenth-century fiction. In any case, the constant succession of films with Pompeii as their central theme undoubtedly manifests every generation's renewed and inexhaustible interest in the city, by using the cinema, the pre-eminent mode of expression since the beginning of the twentieth century.



The Last Days of Pompeii
(Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1935)