Introduction: The Return of the Epic

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In the spring of 2000, some three decades after the well-publicised flops of Cleopatra (Mankiewicz 1963), The Fall of the Roman Empire (Mann 1964) and The Greatest Story Ever Told (Stevens 1965), unsuspecting cinema audiences were once again presented with the lavish and costly historical epics which had ruled the box office a generation earlier. Ridley Scott’s Gladiator, in a seemingly sudden departure from many of Scott’s previous films, told the epic tale of a Roman general-turned-gladiator ‘who defied an emperor’ and who (albeit posthumously) founded a new Roman Republic. Though few could have predicted it at the time, the global success of his film ‘resurrected long-standing traditions of historical and cinematic spectacles’,1 and Scott would later find himself credited with re-launching a genre which had lain dormant for 35 years, heralding ‘a sudden resurrection of toga films after thirty-six years in disgrace and exile’, which prompted critics and scholars alike emphatically to declare the return of the epic.2 Indeed, looking back over the first decade of the twenty-first century, in terms of films and box-office takings the effect of this return is clear: in each year from 2000 to 2010, historical epics have made the top ten highest-grossing films, and attracted numerous awards and nominations.3 Accordingly, from Gladiator to The Immortals (Singh 2011), via Troy (Petersen 2004), Kingdom of Heaven (Scott 2005) and Alexander (Stone 2004), the decade came to be characterised by a slew of historically-themed, costly, spectacular, lavish – in a word, ‘epic’ – films which, though not always as profitable as might have been hoped, performed respectably at the box office.

THE PROBLEM OF A RETURN

Yet, at the same time, the triumphant declaration of the return of the epic is not without its difficulties, which scholarship has been slow to assess. First,
claims about the return of the epic immediately confront issues regarding the term ‘epic’ itself, a word which has ‘joined the long list of words which are rapidly losing their original meanings’. One of the crucial prerequisites for discussing the return of the epic is that we know precisely what we mean by the term itself. Lord of the Rings (Jackson 2001, 2002, 2003), for example, seemed to fall squarely within the historical epic tradition, even if the ‘historical’ context of the film was demonstrably untrue; by the same criterion, however, The Da Vinci Code (Howard 2006) was excluded, since despite its epic sweep of history, the main focal point for the action was the present. Such criteria are, however, ambiguous when it comes to the Harry Potter films (which, in Chapter 11, Deborah Bridge argues ought to be included), which adopt a form of temporal dislocation, but would not disbar Pirates of the Caribbean (Verbinski 2003), given that the action is past, and the epic cinematography and stirring score belong to the production stable of Jerry Bruckheimer, a man who is no stranger to the epic. Yet, somehow, to site Pirates of the Caribbean alongside ‘serious’ epic fare like Gladiator or Troy (Petersen 2004) instinctively feels as though we are comparing two very different kinds of films.

It quickly becomes evident, then, that the definition of ‘epic’ is a largely personal issue, since (as Paul Sturtevant shows in Chapter 7) one person’s fantasy is another’s sci-fi, and in films like Clash of the Titans (Leterrier 2010) or 300 (Snyder 2006), the line between history and mythology becomes considerably less clear. Indeed, one critic discussing the problems of defining the term ‘epic’ suggests that rather than confronting such a nebulous term in theory, we should examine each film on a case-by-case basis, so that ‘we could then send the term “epic” on vacation until some of the confusion died down and was forgotten’.

Second, even more problematic than the term itself, however, is its uncritical application to a group of films, which often unthinkingly assumes the existence of an identifiable, coherent and self-contained genre, an assumption which, after a generation of scholarly works on genre outlining significant difficulties with the term, is by no means straightforward. As Steve Neale observes, attempts to define genres of films are problematic, are often formed on the basis of assumptions of cultural worthiness, or of iconography, and are at times self-contradictory:

What emerges [from studying genre] is that genre as a term has been used in different ways in different fields, and that many of its uses have been governed by the history of the term within those fields . . . rather than by logic or conceptual consistency.

Neale’s proposed responses to this ‘require thinking of genres as ubiquitous, multifaceted phenomena rather than as one-dimensional entities to be
found only within the realms of Hollywood cinema or of commercial cinema’.6

Such problems in using genre in imprecise ways, therefore, have serious consequences if we try to classify the return of the epic as the return of a once defunct genre, for they require us first to prove that the epic films under discussion can indeed be treated as a single genre. This would require us to produce a list of criteria for inclusion within that genre: a reasonably straightforward process in the case of films like *Gladiator* and *Troy*, but considerably more complex in the case of lower-budget films like *Centurion* (Marshall 2010), or non–Hollywood fare like *Arn: Knight Templar* (Flinth 2007) or *Hero* (Yimou 2002). These latter kinds of films, sitting at the fringes of our loose term ‘epic’, rather than clarifying the debate, in fact engender further questions about which films, settings, themes and national cinemas might qualify as suitably ‘epic’. Thus, by treating the issue in simplified terms of genre, rather than solving problems we are in fact creating new ones even more complex than those that existed in the first place.

Third, along the same lines, claims about the return of the epic film make assumptions about the invisibility of the epic during the 1970s,’80s and ’90s, assumptions which overlook a number of key examples which offer some kind of continuation from earlier cycles of epics. We might, for instance, point to the epic film’s survival in a number of other forms and media: for instance, the survival of ancient worlds on television, from *I, Claudius* (1976–7) and *Moses the Lawgiver* (1974) to *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) and *Hercules* (1995–9), which collectively suggest that epic did not die, but merely moved to television.7 Similarly, the claim ignores the overlap between Hollywood epics and their low-budget spin-offs in the form of the peplum, such as the hugely popular – though critically disparaged – films centring on the mythological figure of Maciste, or Steve Reeves in *Le Fatiche di Ercole/Hercules* (Francisci 1958) and *Ercole e la regina di Lidia/Hercules Unchained* (Francisci 1959). These low-budget, Italian B-movies set in classical antiquity (however loosely interpreted) survived in one form or another through to the 1980s with Arnold Schwarzenegger’s debut *Hercules in New York* (Seidelman 1969), and traces can be found in later films like *Conan the Barbarian* (Milius 1982) which drew on similar themes and muscular heroic figures in fantastical, if not outright classical, worlds.8

Finally, to claim the death and rebirth of the epic is to adopt a Hollywood-centric vision which disregards numerous offerings in world cinema, from Pasolini’s *Trilogia della vita* (1971–4) and his engagement with classical themes in *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964), *Edipo Re* (1967) and *Medea* (1969), or Michael Cacoyannis’ engagement with ancient Greek theatre in *The Trojan Women* (1971) or *Iphigenia* (1977). Alternatively, we might mention a number of films traditionally ascribed to other genres which engage either directly or
indirectly with classical themes. Obvious candidates here might include the kinds of sci-fi and fantasy films which Winkler discusses as ‘genre cinema’, and which at first sight have ‘nothing in common with the ancient world [but which] may still adapt plots or patterns familiar from antiquity, particularly those relating to heroic myth’. However, less obvious candidates might include comedies like *Up Pompeii* (Kellett 1971), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (Lester 1966), or *Carry On Cleo* (Thomas 1964); horror such as Hammer’s *The Gorgon* (Fisher 1964); biblical musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Jewison 1973) and *Godspell* (Greene 1973); ‘social problem’ films like *The Warriors* (Hill 1979), which uses Xenophon’s *Anabasis* to create a myth for New York’s underworld; or even pornography in the form of *Caligula* (Brass 1979). While, admittedly, most of these might be difficult to classify as ‘epics’, to discount them we are forced back to the problematic issue of genre outlined above. The proliferation of films with classical themes throughout the 1970s and ‘80s, then, challenges the return of the epic by fundamentally questioning whether epic films ever really went away in the first place. The major difference between these films and the epics under discussion here is in their aesthetic, which calls for the kind of study of the formal and aesthetic qualities of the new epic film found in Part II of this book.

A GENRE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Adopting such a formal approach, and setting aside the issue of genre, even a cursory glance at films like *Gladiator*, *Alexander*, *Troy*, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Agora* (Amenábar 2009) reveals a range of comparable qualities which allow us to group these films together as an important body of films which have enjoyed popularity at the box office and generated significant scholarly discussion. Most scholars working in the field – Robert Burgoyne, Mark Jancovich, Constantine Santas, Jeffrey Richards, Jon Solomon, Martin Winkler, Monica Cyrino, Joanna Paul and Maria Wyke, among others – are broadly in agreement that there is a certain group of films with comparable styles, settings and themes which fell out of favour in the mid-1960s, but which have regained popularity over the past decade. Even more compelling is that all point to *Gladiator* as the first instance of this kind of film’s revival: Cyrino describes it ‘as the first Roman epic made after the end of the Cold War’; Winkler calls the film ‘the first ancient epic produced for the silver screen since the mid-1960s’; Aknin terms it ‘the first real production of this kind since the 1960s’; Solomon describes it as ‘the first heroic tragedy on the cinema screen set in the Graeco-Roman world at the turning point of two millennia’.

Moreover, not only do they point to *Gladiator* as the first of a long line of ancient-world epics, but many also credit the film as the catalyst, if not the
cause, for the revival of the epic; Winkler argues that ‘its gigantic box-office success has made epic cinema a promising venue for commercial filmmaking’, and Cyrino agrees that ‘Gladiator initiated a sudden resurrection of toga films after thirty-six years in disgrace and exile’. James Russell likewise proposes that ‘Gladiator’s success inspired another wave of epics’, and Jerome de Groot points to the resurgence of these toga films as ‘signals [of] a return to the mainstream historical imagination of epic narratives and of classical heroism’. Even Wolfgang Petersen himself acknowledged that it was ‘the gigantic and wholly unsuspected worldwide success of Gladiator [which] made Troy possible’.

However, despite such unanimity (or, perhaps, precisely because of it), even if we can accept the return of the epic, to date no critical study has examined differences between this recent cycle and earlier waves of epics, or their coherence as a single body of films under the epithet ‘epic’. In defining earlier cycles of sword-and-sandal films, for example, critics have variously referred to them as a ‘wave’ (Russell), a ‘genre’ (Wyke), a ‘cycle’ (Richards, Hall and Neale) or else as ‘cross-cultural popular forms’ (Burgoyne) which are to be understood variously as aesthetic labels, generic distinctions, or industrial niches. Looked at from an industrial perspective, the term ‘epic’ can be used ‘to identify, and to sell two overlapping contemporary trends: films with historical, especially ancient world, settings; and large scale films of all kinds which used new technologies, high production values and special modes of distribution and exhibition’.

Questions raised about recent epics, then, are concerned with much more than genre. As Sheldon Hall’s chapter in this volume suggests, when we look in depth at a term like ‘blockbuster’ we are often dealing more with industrial concerns and critics’ nomenclature than with any identifiable properties of the films themselves. Neale and Hall’s Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters eloquently argues that the epic is a loose term, ‘as indicative of size and expense as it was of particular kinds of historical settings, of protagonists who are caught up in large-scale events as it was of those who sway the course of history of the fate of nations’. As such, it is perhaps more productive simply to describe them in terms of a cycle, or ‘filone’ (an Italian term whose rough translation might be ‘strand’, or ‘thread’), as much as a genre.

Understanding the films as a cycle also offers a secondary benefit in that, as well as sidestepping problematic issues of genre, the sense of decline and return implicit in the term usefully allows us to tie these films back to earlier cycles of epics much more clearly. Jeffrey Richards, for instance, makes the important point that the new epic film was as much about earlier epics as it was about history. Consequently, he discusses the return not as a new foray into classical myths, but as a revival of the earlier cycle of films, suggesting that ‘the astonishing worldwide success of [Gladiator] sent film
producers scampering back to the stories that had inspired the previous cycle of Ancient World epics in the 1950s and early 1960s, and new versions of the tales of Troy, Thermopylae, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar duly appeared’.20

It is certainly true that *Gladiator* as a film bears a clear resemblance in terms of plot, aesthetics and even characters to *Spartacus* (Kubrick 1960) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, to the extent that Claude Aziza rather unkindly terms it a ‘capable (but disguised) remake’.21 Cyrino’s analysis, though more charitable, nevertheless insists upon the film’s debt to earlier cycles in her observation that ‘any interpretation of *Gladiator* must take into account its relationship to the Roman epics made in Hollywood in the 1950s and early 1960s’.22 Likewise, as Mark Jancovich points out in his chapter, *Village Voice* film critic Michael Atkinson responded to another film in the cycle by referring directly back to earlier cycles: ‘Troy is everything old made new again: matte-image palaces (digitized, of course), hordes of shield-holding extras (also CGI), dialogue that may well have been burped out by a Hercules-movie-digesting mainframe . . . and risible “ancient” loungewear.’23

However, rather than dismissing the recent epics as merely derivative recycling of earlier themes, we must also remember that the earlier cycle of 1950s epics were often themselves reworkings of silent-era epics. *Ben-Hur* (Wyler 1959) was a direct remake of Fred Niblo’s classic 1925 version, which was in turn an adaptation of Lew Wallace’s novel *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. Mervyn LeRoy’s 1951 *Quo Vadis* had already seen two earlier outings in 1925 and 1913, both of which were in turn adaptations of Sienkiewicz’s novel. Robert Wise’s 1956 *Helen of Troy* was by no means the first to bring the Trojan War to the screen, with a host of earlier versions including one in 1924 (*Helen of Troy*, Noa), a largely lost version in 1927 (*The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, Korda) and the short film *The Fall of Troy* by Borgnetto and Pastrone in 1911. In 1956, Cecil B. De Mille even recycled his own material, making an updated version of his earlier version of *The Ten Commandments* (even if Essoe and Lee argue that the second version ‘hardly resembled his 1923 effort’).24 The fact, then, that all four have seen recent remakes in the twenty-first century (a TV version of *Ben Hur* appeared in 2010 and a film version is slated for 2015; *Quo Vadis* was remade by Jerzy Kawalerowicz in 2001; Petersen’s *Troy* was followed by a made-for-TV version in 2005; *The Ten Commandments* has seen a number of versions in 2006–7 and even a musical version in 2006) can be seen in some ways as part of a natural pattern in which the new returns to the old as much for inspiration as for legitimacy. Such a common reuse of earlier themes reminds us that ‘popular conceptions of particular genres are invariably based on the features of earlier cycles’, which suggests that recycling is perhaps a constituent part of epic filmmaking.25 It is perhaps in this sense that we can see Oliver Stone’s three different versions of *Alexander* as a
normal part of the continual reinvention and repackaging of the epic film. As Michel Lagny claims, the genre is in some ways destined to be remade, since ‘a measure of its success is the way films of the same type were made again and again over a period of years: mass production of this kind is justified only when attendances generate healthy profits (and it ceases as soon as profits fall off)’. It is, in fact, likely that even the earliest cinematic outings of ancient Greece, Rome and the Bible were in themselves indebted to classical settings in other media, especially theatre, opera and novels, demonstrating a ‘continuity between the painting and drama of the nineteenth century both in Britain and the United States and the emergence and development of the Ancient World epic in Hollywood’. The emergence of film came at a time when filmmakers, themselves often having been trained in other visual arts, would cast about for suitable topics to film and most likely fall back on the sources most familiar to them. As a consequence, the relationship between cinema and the epic dates back to cinema’s very earliest days, in which filmmakers would readily seize on classical plots; from the very moment ‘when the cinema emerged . . . it turned naturally to the ancient world and scores of short films were produced with pocket versions of the familiar stories from the Bible, ancient history and classical mythology’. Likewise, Santas observes that ‘from the outset, epic film has feasted on the collective myths of East and West, dipping into the inexhaustible resources of stories from the Bible; from Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Roman and medieval cultures; and from Oriental and Eastern myths’. However, Sam Leith, more bluntly, observes that the attraction of classical antiquity to filmmakers has never been hard to fathom: it has sex (from Theda Bara’s heavy-lidded Cleopatra in 1917, the idea of the ancients being constantly “At It” has persisted), violence (plenty of scope for gladiatorial hurly burly and epic battles) and grand narrative. Graeco-Roman antiquity offers filmmakers a giant out-of-copyright myth kitty.

In this way, then, the return of the epic film becomes more explicable as a body of films loosely based around historical – usually ancient or classical, but also medieval – periods which returned to the big screen and from the very outset began to be aped as part of an industrial strategy to tap into a lucrative market. Such a return seems less surprising, too, when we can understand these films not as genres but as part of a broader pattern of cycles which periodically fall out of favour through cost or surfeit, and which return at other key moments when a combination of technical prowess, audience popularity or industrial strategies create the perfect conditions for germination.
WHY NOW?

Thus, if the epic is a cyclical phenomenon which comes and goes, the final question which the return of the epic poses is not ‘Why are they back?’ but rather ‘Why are they back now?’ This final question is no less problematic than any of the others broached above, in part because the response is contingent on the responses to these other questions. However, it is also difficult to answer because the reason for the epic’s return by necessity depends on which reasons are offered for its disappearance in the 1960s.

The most often cited reason for the demise in the 1950s and ’60s is that the huge costs associated with producing an epic became unsustainable, eventually culminating in the near bankruptcy of several of the major studios. In his classic study of epics, Elley describes the climate of one-upmanship which saw the major studios – particularly MGM and 20th Century Fox – taking on increasing risks as they sought to film ever bigger, more lavish and spectacular epics depicting the classical world. These include The Fall of the Roman Empire’s spectacular re-creation of the Roman forum, which remains one of the largest cinema sets ever constructed, and one ‘which was populated by most of the residents of Las Matas’. Over the course of the decade, as budgets spiralled out of control, such competition would eventually lead to financial gambles in which excessive spending would place them at the mercy of audiences. With so much having been spent on making the film, the break-even point was dependent on ever greater returns at the box office, at times approaching Ben-Hur’s whopping 7.6 per cent of the total box-office takings. The argument runs that the increasing reliance on spectacle – created both through the profligacy of studios and the increasingly sophisticated visual effects designed to achieve greater authenticity – would lead studios to breaking point rather than to break-even point. In the case of Cleopatra, The Fall of the Roman Empire and The Greatest Story Ever Told, for example, the fortunes of major studios such as Paramount were to ride almost entirely on the success or failure of the massive epics.

It is worth noting, however, that even here critical opinion is somewhat divided; while most agree that cost was a major factor which all of the studios suffered equally, many pinpoint individual films which, they argue, acted as cautionary tales sounding the death knell of the cycle, offering stark forecasts of dwindling audience interest. Where Cyrino and Elley date the demise of the epic at 1964, with Mann’s The Fall of the Roman Empire, Winkler (rightly) disputes Bronston’s role as sole architect of the epic’s demise, and instead insists that, if we must blame any individual film it should be Cleopatra on the grounds of its cost and wastefulness. While it may seem unfair to criticise one film for its cost when many others saw eye-watering budgets far above the norm, Cleopatra in particular does stand out as marked by the kind of waste-
ful expenditure which, no matter how well the film performed, in practical terms stood little chance of ever being recouped. Using different criteria, Hall suggests that the epic came to an end in 1965 with The Greatest Story Ever Told (again, rightly, on the basis that this was the last film released which we might describe as part of that epic cycle), while Santas opts for Mankiewicz’s Cleopatra from two years earlier as the point at which alarm bells began to ring. Searles, however, rejects all of these, protesting the unfairness of the legacy left by these films, on the grounds that it is markedly unfair to blame a handful of films for the demise of an entire style of filmmaking without taking into account external factors such as dwindling audiences in general, changing tastes, younger teen audiences for whom the historical epic held little attraction, and a general satiation with the epic as a whole. So although in Searles’ view ‘Cleopatra is generally credited with being a prime contributor to the demise of the expensive historical spectacular’, it is clear that both trends (dwindling audiences and rising costs of the epics) were set to continue, which suggests that the demise of the epic was on the cards long before any of these films went into pre-production.

Nevertheless, if the epic cycles of the 1950s and ’60s did indeed draw to a close because of industrial factors such as cost, then the preconditions for their return would logically need to be the same, or else the epic would remain unfeasible. Consequently, this would mean either that by 1999 the studios were willing once again to risk such make-or-break sums on their blockbuster films, or else that the costs associated with such films had finally fallen to a manageable level. As we shall see in my discussion of special effects in Chapter 8, both positions are vaguely tenable; CGI and crowd-building software meant that the enormous costs of physical sets and hordes of extras were no longer required, and the escalating budgets of 1990s blockbusters means that ‘despite proclamations of doom amongst Hollywood commentators, more money was being invested in epics [at the end of the 1990s] than at any time since the 1960s’. And yet, neither of these propositions can fully explain the return either. CGI and visual effects had been used consistently in other genres throughout the 1970s and ’80s when allegedly no epics were being made, so why was Gladiator not made earlier? Equally, the runaway budgets of Titanic became, according to Paula Parisi, something of a wake-up call for 20th Century Fox’s accounts department, which suggests, if anything, that the major studios would have been far less likely to invest sizeable sums in an unsafe kind of film which had not been made since the 1960s and which, furthermore, had almost bankrupted the studios at that time.

Nor do such arguments take into account other factors, some of which have nothing to do with film at all. For example, Russell and Aknin both suggest that rather than any industrial concerns, it was merely the intervention of a generation gap which allowed filmmakers to relive their youth by making the
epics they saw as children and which, perhaps, inspired them to make films in the first place; ‘as the baby boomers reached maturity, broader demographic shifts... seem to have contributed to a popular belief that the historical epic was once more a relevant form of cinematic expression’. Aknin seems to concur here, suggesting that ‘it was necessary for the last witnesses of the disastrous venture of Cleopatra to disappear, and for an entire new generation to take up the baton, before a new classical epic could see the light of day’. In this case, any in-depth study of production ecologies and Hollywood investment strategies is potentially undermined by a combination of luck, nostalgia and Malthusian population theory.

**PRESENTISM**

One other argument regarding the epic’s return concerns the issue of ‘presentism’ (see Chapters 2 and 3). James Chapman describes it as ‘a truth universally acknowledged... that a historical feature film will often have as much to say about the present in which it was made as about the past in which it was set’. The intercorrelation between the past and the present – otherwise called a conflation of temporal planes by Sobchack and White – is an idea most prominently proposed by Siegfried Kracauer in his argument that historical films reflect the collective cultural consciousness, and one carried forward by Pierre Sorlin. This is especially true in the depiction of ancient history, as Jeffrey Richards reminds us, since ‘the Ancient World epics tell us as much about the preoccupations and values of the period in which they were made as about the period in which they were set’.

According to this way of thinking, a historical film might use the past as a way of talking about, pointing to, parodying or rejecting the present, and indeed from the outset Gladiator’s screenwriter Franzoni openly acknowledged that ‘the movie is about us. It’s not just about ancient Rome, it’s about America’. However, one of the risks of this argument is that it can be taken further to suggest that, instead of simply using the past to comment on the present, the ways in which films and television treat the past unwittingly reveal more about our values than they do about anything historical. This position in effect transmutes the conscious use of past-as-commentary to an unconscious, vaguely Freudian, revelation of our deepest fears, in much the same way as dreams are conceived as revelations of our unconscious thoughts. To read historical films in such a way is to oversimplify Peter C. Rollins’ assertion that ‘without intending to act the role of historian, Hollywood has often been an unwitting recorder of national moods’, since this discredits the historical film’s ability to say anything important about the past, but rather patronisingly asserts instead that they can only ever slavishly mirror the era in which the
film was made. As a useful way around this, in an excellent study of classical antiquity in modern culture Martin Winkler terms these unconscious uses of history a ‘cultural seismograph’, a concept which allows for a reading of historical films as in part a reflection of the present, but which does not preclude an earnest attempt to retell historical events, thus reconciling these positions with traditional criticism of historical films.

If the past is thus a safe but effective way of critiquing the present, it makes some logical sense to look at the politico-ideological context of the return; just as the Cold War provoked so many useful metaphors about naming-and-shaming (such as *Spartacus*), or the threat of pagan, proto-communist enemies at the gates who risk derailing white Christian values and ways, or communist moles operating from within, perhaps what Chomsky terms America’s ‘hegemony or survival’ approach prompted an introspective critique which emerged as a metaphor in *Gladiator*’s neo-imperial designs, as Cyrino persuasively argues.

In this way, as the Cold War was replaced by a global ‘War on Terror’, so too would new versions of past worlds emerge to critique armed incursions in the Middle East (*Kingdom of Heaven*, *Robin Hood* (Scott 2010), *Arn*), or to offer warnings based on past efforts at conquest (*Alexander*) or else actively to endorse them (*300*). In the aftermath of openly falsified justifications for war in Iraq, we find attacks on unjustified warmongering (*Troy*, *Centurion*), or scepticism towards cynical political manoeuvring (*King Arthur* (Fuqua 2004), *The Eagle* (Macdonald 2011), *The Last Legion* (Lefler 2007)); amid contentious debates about religious ideologies we find scathing attacks on fundamentalism of all stripes (*Agora*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, *King Arthur*).

Accordingly, then, we might suggest 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 place at the turn of the millennium.

**ABOUT THIS BOOK**

It is clear, then, that the only way out of such a multifaceted debate is to recognise the return of the epic as a real phenomenon, but one whose motivations probably include a combination of all of these factors in varying degrees. Whatever the reasons for its return, as the following chapters argue, ancient and medieval worlds are back on our screens, and alive and well in the box office at the time of writing.

The undisputed popularity of *Gladiator* and its successors calls for a coherent study moving beyond genre theory to one which examines how we define these epics, and what criteria we are using to do so, whether there are any
formal and aesthetic qualities which unite these films, and whether the term ‘epic’ relates exclusively to a North American, or more specifically Hollywood, canon. Given that, as I have tried to show above, there are potentially as many answers to these issues as there are questions, my intentions in this collection were to gather together the thoughts of some of the best critics writing about these issues, alongside those of emerging new voices in the field who have been trained to cross disciplinary lines in order to understand popular culture’s uses of the past. The various chapters in this book thus embrace a range of approaches which take into account the entire production process from the industrial context to marketing and reception, and one which questions the canon of films conventionally accepted as epics, as well as the formal and aesthetic aspects of the epic film.

To the three major questions discussed here – questions about what form this return might take, about our definitions of the epic canon, and about the epic’s use of history – the response of this book is appropriately threefold. Part I begins by looking at the question of the relevance of ancient history to today’s audiences. In Chapter 2, Jeffrey Richards examines Ridley Scott’s unofficial trilogy of *Gladiator*, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Robin Hood* to suggest that they represent, at base, the same film three times, which each reflect Scott’s own ideological concerns. This is followed by Kevin J. Harty’s discussion in Chapter 3 of the return of the epic in terms of its relevance to contemporary US politics, offering some cinematic parallels between the fall of Rome and the ‘American Empire’. In Chapter 4, Mark Jancovich examines the critical reception of the new epic film, using film critics’ responses to the epic to show that – somewhat surprisingly – despite *Gladiator*’s initially frosty reception, as the decade wore on critics gradually warmed to the spectacle and CGI which accompanied these films. Chapter 5 sees Robert Stow using the results of a revealing audience study of *Gladiator* and *Centurion* to show that when it comes to the public appetite for, and understanding of, these films, a marked divergence between scholarly appreciation and public enjoyment reveals that these two audiences come to the epic films with very different expectations.

In Part II, the focus moves to aesthetic and formal appreciation. In Chapter 6, Robert Burgoyne argues for a new mode of analysing the epic, namely a focus on colour which allows us to tie together films like *Alexander* and *Hero*. In Chapter 7, Paul Sturtevant examines the idea of genre in more depth to argue that the relationship between a hero and wider national concerns allows us to understand why some epic films seem more naturally suited to the epithet ‘epic’ than others. This is followed by my own analysis in Chapter 8 of the CGI and special effects which have become associated with the epic film, in which I argue that they serve a dual purpose in the modern epic: to increase the epic’s traditional sense of spectacle but also to enhance verisimilitude and/or narrative plausibility.
Part III turns to examine the epic canon, using a range of films falling outside of traditional definitions of epics to argue against what we might term the ‘epic canon’. In Chapter 9 Sheldon Hall looks at the etymology of the term ‘blockbuster’, situating it in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, showing that its association with expensive pictures thus places it firmly in a Hollywood industrial context. This is followed in Chapter 10 by Saër Maty Bâ’s study of ‘planetary humanism’, in which he argues that cultural assumptions about the white body prevent us from seeing the black body in cinema in what he calls an ‘epic stumbling block’. In the same vein, in Chapter 11 Deborah Bridge offers a persuasive challenge to include Harry Potter in the epic canon; looking at the reasons for dismissing the films, she uses traditional definitions of the epic to make the case for the inclusion of the Potter franchise and thus, by extension, poses wider questions about our assumptions of what is, or is not, epic. Such a challenge is continued in Chapter 12, which sees Aarttee Kaul Dhar examine two remakes of a fundamental Indian epic, the Ramayana, to question whether a global myth can become epic and still keep in touch with its national roots.

Overall, each of the chapters included in this volume rethinks the epic in one way or another, by examining the return of the epic and its use of history, as well as questioning what we tend to include in the epic canon and what this reveals about our values and ideas. As editor I am happy to give full credit for all of the great ideas in the chapters which follow to the authors themselves, and to acknowledge responsibility for any factual or typographical errors as wholly my own. If the great William Wyler was unable to spot the wrist-watch on one of his extras, if Ridley Scott missed a pair of sunglasses in his Colosseum crowd, and if Wolfgang Petersen managed to miss an aeroplane in the background of the Trojan landscape, should any errors be discovered in this text I should think myself to be in very good company indeed.

NOTES

8. For more on the Italian peplum, see Michèle Lagny, ‘Popular Taste: The Peplum’, in


15. Winkler, Troy: From Homer’s Iliad to Hollywood Epic, p. 3.


18. Hall and Neale, Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters, p. 5.


26. For a candid discussion of Stone’s problems with ‘letting the film go from my consciousness’, see Stone’s Afterword in Cartledge and Greenland, Responses to Oliver Stone’s Alexander, pp. 337–51, p. 341.
28. Richards, Hollywood’s Ancient Worlds, foreword; see also Chapter 1, pp. 1–23 of the same work.
33. Elley, The Epic Film, p. 21.
36. This, for instance, is the argument made convincingly by Jeffrey Richards in Hollywood’s Ancient Worlds. However, in a review of this work Winkler does raise some objections, claiming that ‘Bronston’s financial problems were considerably more complex’, Film and History, 41:1 (Spring 2011), pp. 112–15 (here p. 114); see also Martin M. Winkler (ed.), The Fall of the Roman Empire: Film and History (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).
39. Searles, Epic!, p. 46.
49. Winkler, *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, pp. 3–22, see also his introduction to *Troy: From Homer’s Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, p. 4, note 13.