

Classical Masculinity and the Spectacular Body on Film

The Mighty Sons of Hercules

Daniel O'Brien



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Introduction

The muscular male body has enjoyed a privileged, if contentious, status in mainstream Western cinema since the early days of the medium, most notably in forms linked to classical Greco-Roman culture. Examples include muscle-bound heroes of Italian silent film, the *peplum* cycle launched by *Le fatiche di Ercole / Hercules* (Pietro Francisci, 1958), Hollywood epics such as *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960) and the 1980s sword-and-sorcery cycle and post-millennial epics such as *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004). Focusing on the *peplum* and its influence, I argue that these classically-inflected action films constitute a major cinematic form which has often been marginalised in the fields of media and cultural studies. Through a series of case studies, I provide an analysis and reassessment of their representations of heroic masculinity that, in my view, transcend such reductive labels as ‘camp’ or ‘kitsch’. I also explore how previous scholarship has frequently characterised these heroic male bodies as endorsing the value of white male physical strength, invoking racist and fascist subtexts, in the context of a reactionary patriarchal status quo. I argue that the depiction of masculinity in these films is more varied, problematic and contradictory than this over-generalised reading would suggest, especially in relation to femininity and non-whiteness. It is furthermore my contention that these diverse representations of masculinity offer a notable contribution to ongoing debates on maleness—both within and beyond academia—that has been largely unexplored and unappreciated. In particular, Hercules must be considered one of the most significant mythopoetic figures of all time, a name and story as broadly known as those of King Arthur, Count Dracula, Robin Hood, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan and James Bond. Hercules’s mythopoesis has greatly informed both classical and popular cultural interpretations of masculinity, the male body and especially the exaggerated male form.

In this section, I outline the aims of the book, discussing the pivotal *peplum* genre and associated debates. I also outline major discourses around the concept of masculinity, both in general and in relation to the *peplum* and other cinematic depictions of heroic masculinity. The rest of the book is divided into three main sections, subdivided into

chapters on specific films, which address the areas of white masculinity, femininity and non-whiteness from a broad socio-cultural perspective.

The *Peplum* in Context

In *A Short History of the Movies*, first published in 1971, US scholar Gerald Mast claimed that American investment in the Italian film industry had stimulated not only 'art cinema' but also 'the cheap, trash films' (Mast, 1976, p. 364). For Mast, a prime example of the latter was the *peplum*, a series of mythological action films produced in Italy from 1957 to 1965, though he used the term "'spectacle" films', appearing to question even this attribute (Mast, 1976, p. 364). He argued that the *peplum* represented an abandonment of qualities associated with early post-World War II Italian cinema—in terms of ideas, social comment, realistic observation and poetic imagery—pandering instead to mainstream film conventions and practices (Mast, 1976, p. 365). In both form and content, the *peplum* revealed nothing of interest about the era of its production and reception, nor had it anything to offer subsequent debates in film and cultural studies.

This distinction between art and trash in Italian cinema is encapsulated by a scene from *Boccaccio '70* (1962), a portmanteau film with episodes by respected directors Vittorio De Sica, Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti. The Fellini segment, 'Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio', shows a cheap Hercules film being shot on the streets of Rome. The polyglot production features fake boulders, a star too weak to carry his leading lady and a one-eyed director in a wheelchair. From Mast's perspective, this parodic snapshot of *peplum* film-making illustrates clearly why the genre merits no serious consideration. Even Hercules's beard is false. Mast's views were perhaps not representative of 1970s English-language academic discourse on the *peplum*, but the absence of debate during this period reflects a dismissive attitude towards the genre that has altered only gradually. In 2011, US academic Frank Burke argued that the *peplum* has still not attracted much scholarly attention, an assessment I would class as only slight exaggeration (Burke, 2011, p. 17). In my estimation, the *peplum* is a significant cinematic form which has influenced both contemporaneous and subsequent US filmic depictions of mythical heroes. The genre that Hercules built merits reassessment, and my re-evaluation of the *peplum* also underlines the cultural value of Italian and indeed European genre cinema, fields still overshadowed in film studies by the dominant Hollywood models.

The *peplum* in the late 1950s spearheaded the resurgence of Italian popular cinema in the international market, achieving a level of exposure

and commercial success not experienced since the silent era. According to contemporary accounts, the most successful film at the British box office in 1960 was *Ercole e la regina di Lidia / Hercules Unchained* (Francisci, 1959), an unprecedented achievement for a dubbed low-budget import (Anon, *Films and Filming*, 1961, p. 29). The UK film industry journal *Kine Weekly* listed three other *pepla* in its 1960 survey of domestic box-office hits: *La battaglia di Maratona / The Giant of Marathon* (Jacques Tourneur, 1959), *Il terrore dei barbari / Goliath and the Barbarians* (Carlo Campogalliani, 1959) and *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei / The Last Days of Pompeii* (Mario Bonnard, Sergio Leone, 1959), along with the Italian-made classical epic *Nel segno di Roma / Sign of the Gladiator* (Guido Brignone, 1959) (Murphy, 1986, p. 189). The *pepla* highlighted the bodies of their leading men, cast as heroes from Greco-Roman legend or ancient history. The stars were usually bodybuilders, with little or no acting experience, dressed in minimal costumes that emphasised their physiques, their characters placed in narratives of contest, conflict and ordeal. Critics and academics such as Richard Whitehall (1963), Gianni Rondolino (1979) and Richard Dyer (1996, 1997) have noted that the cycle began with *Hercules*, starring champion US bodybuilder Steve Reeves. *Hercules* established the *peplum* ground rules, foregrounding the muscular male body as an instrument of self-reliance, liberation and moral authority.

I have chosen the term *peplum* to identify and group these films rather than the alternative 'sword and sandal' label, which derives from US-led discourse, for several reasons. As discussed below, the *peplum* category originated with French critics during the early 1960s and predates the term 'sword and sandal'. Writing in the early 1990s, Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau employed the term *peplum* partly because 'no similar common term has emerged in theory or criticism written in English' and I argue this remains the case in 2014 (Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992, p. 179). *Peplum* is a relatively neutral label in that it does not invoke so readily the evaluative and often negative associations of 'sword and sandal', whether low-brow, high-camp or trash. For the purposes of this book, I define *peplum* as a mythological, historical-mythological or pseudo-mythological action movie, usually based on Greco-Roman legend, produced in Italy between 1957 and 1965, with the participation of at least one Italian production company, a predominantly Italian cast and crew and, with some exceptions, a bodybuilder cast in the starring role (cf. Dyer, 1997, p. 146). It should be noted that, as far as can be determined, the term *peplum* was not used by film-makers, distributors, exhibitors, the popular press or audiences in identifying, defining or promoting these films. Rather, a group of critics required a term that

identified and legitimised a collection of films they regarded as worthy of serious critical recognition and study. Thus, while the *peplum* employed a generic verisimilitude that was recognised, understood and appreciated by spectators, the majority of audiences did not know these films as *pepla*. I argue, however, that this group of mythological action films form, or at least participate in, a distinctive, if fluid, generic corpus. In terms of English-language commentary, the *peplum's* status as a specific category can be traced back at least as far as 1963, when *Films and Filming* critic Ian Johnson expressed an appreciation for Italian spectacles that offered 'musclemen and mythology' (Johnson, 1963, p. 29), characterising the genre in terms of its nationality, spectacle (body-centred or otherwise), stars and nominal source material.

The earliest significant debates on the *peplum* originated in the French critical journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. These were rooted in *auteur* theory, highlighting director Vittorio Cottafavi and *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide / Hercules Conquers Atlantis* (1961), and proved influential on British and Italian film criticism (cf. Moullet, 1962, pp. 39–42; Whitehall, 1963, p. 33; Rondolino, 1979, p. 186). While Cottafavi retained a measure of his 1960s currency in subsequent English-language critical and, to a lesser extent, academic discourse, he did not achieve a lasting *auteur* status outside France and Italy (cf. Milne, 1986, p. 19; Dyer, 1996, p. 39; Aprà et al., 2010). 1960s critics also discussed the genre in terms of its commercial success, domestic and international. British critic Richard Whitehall identified social and political factors at work, suggesting the *peplum's* uncomplicated heroics and black-and-white moral certainties suited the public mood at a time of global Cold War tensions and nuclear anxiety (Whitehall, 1963, pp. 8–9). Italian critic Goffredo Fofi suggested in 1967 that the *peplum* benefited from fortuitous timing, arriving when several traditional genres highlighting heroic men of action were in decline, notably the Hollywood 'B' western, and, in Italy, the *cappa e spada* or 'cloak and sword' film (Fofi, 1967/79, p. i). For the most part, English-language critical commentary on the *peplum* declined along with the genre itself after the mid-1960s, and scholarly interest did not achieve significant momentum for another twenty-five years.

Academic debates on the *peplum* should be placed within the wider contexts of Italian and European cinema, though the latter remains a problematic area of study, not least in terms of ready definition (cf. Fowler, 2002, p. 1; Mathijs and Mendik, 2004, pp. 1–2). Until the 1980s, academic constructions of European film were based predominantly around notions of art cinema, emphasising high culture, elitism, significant movements (such as Italian neo-realism and French *nouvelle vague*)

and *auteurism* (Fowler, 2002, p. 4). David Bordwell's 1979 essay on art cinema characterised it as 'a distinct branch of the cinematic institution' that departed from the classical Hollywood narrative mode and promoted realism over the escapism associated with the latter (Bordwell, 2002, pp. 94, 95). This definition of European cinema was partly a reaction against the dominance of popular Hollywood cinema in terms of both film production (and distribution) and film studies (Fowler, 2002, p. 5). Writing in 1981, Steve Neale argued the term 'art cinema' had not been sufficiently defined, elaborated or analysed but recognised that it offered a space 'in which an indigenous cinema can develop and make its critical and economic mark' (Neale, 2002, pp. 103, 104). Low culture, in the form of popular and/or genre cinema, was invariably excluded. Jill Forbes and Sarah Street concur that while art cinema remains contentious as a category, it has proved useful as a marketing tool in terms of the international distribution and promotion of European cinema (Forbes and Street, 2000, p. 40).

Until the early 1990s, European films judged to fall outside the categories of art or *auteur* cinema received little attention in English-language film and cultural studies. One of the first attempts to counter this gap in scholarship was the 1989 Popular European Cinema Conference, an international event organised by Vincendeau and Dyer and held at the University of Warwick in England. The introduction to the conference catalogue noted the long-standing and deep-rooted tendency to equate Hollywood with popular film, and European cinema with avant-garde, art and *auteur* film, and proposed a radically different approach, declaring European popular film 'both culturally significant and fully as capable of high aesthetic achievement as Hollywood' (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1989, p. i). A selection of the papers presented formed the basis for a 1992 book which developed the argument that popular European film, long regarded as second-rate, must be re-evaluated as both art and social document (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1992, p. 11). Vincendeau and Dyer state that the term 'popular' can refer to commercial success and/or artefacts produced by or in tune with 'the people' (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1992, p. 2). While these market and anthropological approaches are by no means unproblematic, they offer viable alternatives to debates on European film confined to art cinema, which risk playing down or erasing stylistic and cultural differences between films from each country (Vincendeau and Dyer, 1992, p. 8). Around the same time, Pierre Sorlin's *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939–1990* offered a comparative social history which drew its primary material from the cinema, making no particular distinction between art film and popular film

(Sorlin, 1991, p. 5). Sorlin characterises cinema as a whole as ‘a popular means of entertainment’ (Sorlin, 191, p. 5), and it is arguable that in practice the art/popular categories overlap to such an extent that the validity—and usefulness—of this divide is open to question (cf. Ndalianis, 2007, p. 87). As Dimitris Eleftheriotis notes, art cinema rarely, if ever, occupies an idealised, non-commercial sphere, any more than popular film is lacking entirely in an aesthetic sense, sophistication or creativity (Eleftheriotis, 2001, p. 73).

As with European cinema, for a long time English-language discourses on Italian cinema defined it in narrow and highly selective terms. US scholar Sergio J. Pacifici, in his 1956 essay ‘Notes toward a Definition of Neo-Realism’, argued the movement had contributed towards the formation of a genuine Italian cinema (Pacifici, 1965, p. 45), and over the ensuing decades neo-realism remained a keystone for academic debates on Italian film. In *How to Read a Film*, first published in 1977, James Monaco characterised neo-realism as depicting ordinary, often working-class, lives and employing non-professional actors, unpolished technique (whether by aesthetic choice or financial necessity), a socio-political message and focusing on ideas rather than entertainment (Monaco, 1981, p. 253). The movement also marked the emergence of major film-makers such as De Sica, Visconti and Roberto Rossellini, an *auteur* canon supplemented by figures such as Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni and Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose early work had links, direct or otherwise, to neo-realism. Writing in 1981, Neale identified neo-realism as ‘the very paradigm of Art Cinema’ (Neale, 2002, p. 113), linking both to Mast’s conception of innovative, socially relevant Italian cinema and the wider debates on European film in relation to art and popular cinema. While neo-realism’s status as a coherent movement distinct from mainstream Italian cinema has been much debated (cf. Dyer, 2007, pp. 232, 234), its associated style, such as location-based filming, and narrative devices, including ellipses and open endings, were perceived to have ‘influenced the emergence of an international modernist cinema’ (Thompson and Bordwell, 1994, p. 423). As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith notes, if few neo-realist films were commercially successful, their international critical reputation and development of what was perceived as a distinctively Italian subject matter meant that ‘for many years “Italian cinema” was synonymous with the neo-realist production’ (Nowell-Smith, 2007, p. 233).

With English-language studies of Italian cinema anchored around neo-realism and its associated *auteurs*, popular Italian film was for many years relegated to the periphery of debates on Italian art cinema or

simply not mentioned at all. Pierre Leprohon proposed then dismissed a Golden Age of Italian silent film, notable for historical epics and other popular genres, such as comedy and melodrama, which were, in his view, insignificant technically and aesthetically (Leprohon, 1972, pp. 16, 30, 61). Subsequent studies made reference to the classical epics of the early twentieth century and their commercial success in both the domestic and foreign markets (cf. Bondanella, 2002, pp. 3–6; Neale, 2002, p. 111). There were few detailed studies of Italian popular film, with rare exceptions such as Christopher Frayling's 1981 book on spaghetti westerns, which prompted, in part at least, a gradual re-evaluation of the genre and, in particular, made a case for director Sergio Leone as an *auteur* (Frayling, 2006). By the mid-1990s, the growth of scholarship on European popular cinema was reflected in debates on Italian film. For example, Sorlin's *Italian National Cinema 1896–1996* examines the shifting relationship between Italian society and Italian cinema, referencing both art and popular film (Sorlin, 1996); Christopher Wagstaff argues in *Hollywood and Europe* that as early as the late 1940s the US dominance of Italian cinemas was countered by a resurgence of popular genres, including melodrama, musical, comedy and adventure (Wagstaff, 1998, pp. 75–6). As with popular European film in general, the emergence of Italian popular cinema as a recognised subject within film studies has proved a gradual process (cf. Brizio-Skov, 2011; Bayman, 2011; Bayman and Rigoletto, 2013).

Michèle Lagny notes how, prior to the early 1990s, the handful of scholarly debates on the *peplum* were either entirely dismissive or focused on the genre's perceived ideological unsoundness (Lagny, 1992, p. 163). Leprohon saw the *peplum* as a commercially successful but otherwise unremarkable revival of the costume-adventure film, 'a perennial feature of the Italian cinema' (Leprohon, 1972, p. 174). Angela Dalle Vacche concurs with Mast that the *peplum* is a regressive and reactionary form of film-making, in marked contrast to neo-realism and the recognised Italian *auteurs* (Dalle Vacche, 1992, p. 52; cf. Burke, 2011, p. 27). These attitudes have persisted into the twenty-first century. Maggie Günsberg, discussing gender and genre in Italian popular cinema, also characterises the *peplum* as an intrinsically reactionary form that promotes traditional gender, race and class values (Günsberg, 2005, p. 7). Film historian Mira Liehm argued in the mid-1980s that the *peplum* refracts and embodies economic, social and ideological realities of its era, a point I address below, but this more measured assessment of the genre is a brief digression from an agenda still based around the neo-realist movement (Liehm, 1984, p. 183; cf. Burke, 2011, p. 18).

Despite the rise of scholarly interest in Italian popular film, in terms of *peplum*-specific discourses, no particular school of thought has dominated the field at any given time. The mid-1990s saw one of the first book-length English-language works on the genre: Patrick Lucanio's *With Fire and Sword*, published in 1994. A US academic, Lucanio emphasised the *peplum's* status as a neglected genre and discussed its US promotion, box-office success and the casting of bodybuilders (Lucanio, 1994, pp. vii, 22). Most of the book, however, consists of a catalogue of *pepla* (and related titles) released in the US, and his approach offers little in the way of sustained critical or theoretical discussion. The genre's use of bodybuilders has been debated further (Cohan, 1997; Wyke, 2002; Burke, 2011; D'Amelio, 2011) in a wider historical-political context that links the *peplum* to the post-World War II Americanisation of Italy. Elsewhere, academic histories of Italian cinema, among other texts, follow Leprohon's lead in noting the genre's commercial success at home and abroad, especially in the crucial US market (Bondanella, 1983/2002, p. 159; Bondanella, 2009, p. 167; cf. Thompson and Bordwell, 1994, p. 423). There are debates over the local audience profile, in terms of class, education and literacy, though the scant extant documentary evidence is reflected in the polarised conclusions (Lagny, 1992, p. 163; Sorlin, 1996, p. 125; Burke, 2011, p. 31). The *peplum* has also been placed in its local industrial context and identified by Peter Bondanella (1983), among others, as characteristic of the industry at the time, a 'faddish' genre created by numerous and rapid imitations of a popular original, in this instance *Hercules* (Bondanella, 2002, p. 161; cf. Wood, 2005, p. 11). Tim Bergfelder locates the *peplum* in a broader context of European co-productions which enabled film-makers to 'boost productivity, to share production costs and to increase the number of cinema-goers' (Bergfelder, 2000, p. 141). Sheldon Hall examines the US promotion and distribution of the *peplum* in terms of the aggressive mass marketing and saturation release of product perceived as second-rate that exploited public curiosity and gullibility for rapid commercial gain (Hall, 2002, p. 14).

As the above examples demonstrate, there are various strands of academic discourse relating to the *peplum*. I feel, however, that this genre has not been mapped comprehensively, especially in regard to its representation of masculinity. Lagny reads the *peplum* as a valorisation of the male body (Lagny, 1992, p. 170), and fellow academics such as Dyer and Günsberg have developed this aspect of *peplum* scholarship in terms of gender, race and fascism, the last of these linked with then-recent Italian history (Dyer, 1997; Günsberg, 2005). Dyer's book *White*

(1997) examines depictions of whiteness in Western visual culture and the chapter 'The white man's muscles' discusses the various factors that contributed to the *peplum's* construction of 'the idealised white man' (Dyer, 1997, p. 165). As noted, Günsberg argues that gender representation in Italian popular cinema is informed to a large extent by conservative patriarchal ideology (a situation by no means exclusive to Italy) and discusses the *peplum* body in terms of an idealised masculine physicality (Günsberg, 2005, pp. 1, 110). Thus the genre is read as a valorisation of white male strength, physical and moral, set in contrast and opposition to femininity and non-whiteness, qualities marked as fundamentally different and, by their nature, inherently inferior.

Aspects of this representation remain insufficiently addressed, reflecting too restrictive an approach that reiterates key points without developing or challenging them. The depiction of heroic manliness in these films is more varied than previous readings suggest, undermining the concept of a singular, mono-faceted *peplum* masculinity that is readily identified and categorised (cf. Elliott, 2011, pp. 60, 61). The casting of bodybuilders undercuts the presentation of masculinity as an ostensibly natural, fixed and unchanging essence, emphasising instead its status as a cultural construction perpetuated and performed in accordance with and furtherance of the dictates of a dominant ideology. Representing manliness in terms of the displayed male body also invokes undercurrents of passivity and homoeroticism that the *peplum* attempts to counter through various methods (cf. Lagny, 1992, p. 171; Cohan, 1997, p. 182). Subsequent cinematic representations of heroic masculinity are marked by similar contradictions and the resultant tensions are reflected in both the variation and continuation in evidence from Steve Reeves's Hercules to Gerard Butler's Leonidas in *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007).

Theorising Masculinity

Masculinity, whether in terms of ideology, gender politics or sheer spectacle, is central to discussions of the *peplum*. Any analysis of the genre needs to be placed in the context of wider debates on representations of masculinity in the cinema and the mass culture or cultures it refracts. Conceptions of masculinity are sometimes assumed to constitute a homogenous, universal phenomenon with no significant, let alone problematic or contradictory, variations. In fact, debates on what it means to be a man form a series of multifaceted national, historical, social and cultural constructs. As my case studies will demonstrate, the representation of heroic masculinity differs significantly even between

films produced in similar contexts and characterised as belonging to the same genre. The *peplum* label may evoke a particular idea of masculinity, centred on the exposed body, yet counter representations can be found both within the genre and in non-*peplum* films depicting ostensibly the same setting and subject matter.

While ‘masculinity’ is by no means an academic discipline in and of itself, studies of masculinities form what social historian R. W. Connell terms ‘a comprehensible field of knowledge’ (Connell, 2005, p. xiii). Sociologist Peter F. Murphy dates academic debates on masculinity back to the late 1970s, partly as a response to feminist theory, and drawing on fields such as sociology, anthropology and psychology (Murphy, 1994, p. 3; cf. Hoch, 1979). Anthropologist David D. Gilmore notes how most societies have ideas, however vague or notional, about ‘true’ manhood and, moreover, that this quality is not the same as simple anatomical maleness but is rather a state or status achieved by boys against powerful odds (Gilmore, 1990, pp. xi-ii, 11). Sociologist Christopher E. Forth sees enduring Western notions of an essential masculinity as a reaction against modernity, that is, ‘the more sedentary conditions of modern life that have emerged since the sixteenth century’ (Forth, 2008, pp. 5–6). This masculinity may be less restrained, highly physical and even aggressive (Forth, 2008, p. 6). Fellow sociologist Arthur Brittan also notes in Western culture—whether art, literature or other media—a tendency to depict and celebrate masculinity in terms of the hero, hunter, competitor and conqueror (Brittan, 1989, p. 77). In other words, being biologically male does not automatically bestow the status of manhood, and the latter quality, while found in various forms across different societies and cultures, often appeals to ideas of an essential, pre-modern masculinity that must be attained rather than granted and which emphasises action over intellect. There are, of course, other conceptions of and approaches to masculinity, yet the ideas sketched above serve to illuminate notions of heroic maleness that are central to the classically-inflected action film.

Connell also identifies a general assumption that ‘there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of “real men”, “natural man”’ (Connell, 1995, p. 45). This ‘true masculinity’ is located in and inherent to the male body. Historian George L. Mosse suggests this corporeal concept or stereotype of true manliness ‘was so powerful precisely because unlike abstract ideas or ideals it could be seen, touched’ (Mosse, 1996, p. 6). Western European concepts of masculine perfection can be dated back to the eighteenth century, drawing inspiration, like the *peplum*, from the classical world centred on Ancient

Greece (Mosse, 1996, p. 28) or rather surviving artefacts of this culture (or copies thereof) and what they were taken to represent. Mosse cites the pioneering and influential work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, such as *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755) and *History of Ancient Art* (1764) (Mosse, 1996, p. 29). It is worth noting here that, as Miriam Hansen states, the term 'classical', ostensibly a historical category, also implies the transcendence of history, claiming a 'transcultural appeal and universality' associated with 'a timeless sense of beauty, proportion, harmony, and balance derived from *nature*' (Hansen, 2000, p. 338). Thus the classical masculine ideal is also the true masculinity.

While the body is a crucial component in constructing ideas of masculinity, the process of construction is open to question and challenge (cf. Whitehead, 2002, p. 203). Far from being a fixed, gender-defined quality, 'masculinity' and its representation cannot be maintained, or even comprehended, in isolation from the culture that produces it. The very notion of acting like a man, in order to comply with accepted notions of masculinity, should underline its status as an act. This book is based on the assumption that the presentation or representation of masculinity always carries an element of performance or display, rather than being mere biological or genetic programming that simply 'comes naturally'. This performance is usually in compliance with—and furtherance of—the prevailing norms determined, upheld and perpetuated by patriarchal societies. In terms of cinematic performance, Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim identify a fundamental paradox, whereby a male star representing a masculine ideal of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency cedes control of his body on two levels, 'by passively submitting himself firstly to the grooming processes and then to the look of the camera' (Kirkham and Thumim, 1993, p. 25).

In the cinema, depictions of heterosexual or 'straight' masculinity are employed as 'a structuring norm' which is not intended to be questioned, let alone analysed, criticised or subverted (Neale, 1993, p. 9). Writing in the 1980s, Neale noted a lack of detailed study of 'how heterosexual masculinity is inscribed and the mechanisms, pressures, and contradictions that inscription may involve' (Neale, 1993, p. 9). Promoting fantasies of power and omnipotence, mainstream depictions of masculinity are intended to be read only in accordance with culturally-ordained constructions of maleness (Neale, 1993, p. 12). Yet the very act of representing masculinity in terms of the male body is inherently problematic and unstable. Neale argues, 'the spectatorial look in mainstream cinema is implicitly male' (Neale, 1993, p. 19). The female body is presented on screen as a legitimate object of contemplation and

desire, often defining femininity solely in terms of the body. The male body should not, and cannot, be presented in the same way. For a man to look at an image of masculinity without disturbing the prevailing notions of maleness and male sexuality, the relationship between spectator and image must be contained and regulated. Neale suggests that 'in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed' (Neale, 1993, p. 14). Steven Cohan concurs that 'an open acknowledgment of the male body's erotic appeal confuses the gender orthodoxy of who looks as opposed to who is looked at' (Cohan, 1997, p. 179). Michael G. Cornelius argues that when the cinematic gaze is *homogendered*, men looking at men, the object becomes an image of attainment, both societal and personal, as opposed to the *heterogendered* gaze where the object is sexually desirable (Cornelius, 2011, p. 159). Thus while Hollywood 'beefcake' stars such as Victor Mature were marketed to female viewers as objects of desire, male viewers were supposed to admire Mature's masculine virility and physical prowess in strictly non-sexual terms, their erotic contemplation focused solely on 'cheesecake' starlets.

Neale has documented a classic cinematic strategy for eliminating, or at least suppressing, the 'threat' of inappropriately eroticised masculinity. Images of violence directed against the male body 'are marks both of the repression involved and of a means by which the male body may be disqualified as an object of erotic contemplation and desire' (Neale, 1993, p. 14). The male body subjected to violence, marked by cuts, bruises and puncture wounds, has any erotic traces literally beaten out of it. While the success of this strategy is open to debate, its repeated and indeed formulaic deployment in mainstream cinema is beyond question. Scenarios of conflict serve also to present masculinity as active, aggressive performance. The male body at rest risks being evaluated solely in terms of its physical attractiveness; the male body in action undercuts the connotations of passive display associated with femininity. Discussing *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985), Susan Jeffords argues that 'by representing Rambo's body as performance, the otherwise erotically suggestive display of his bare chest throughout the film is diverted as an object of military training, "a fighting machine"' (Jeffords, 1989, p. 13). The longer, fiercer and more spectacular is the combat, the greater the diversion away from unacceptable eroticism. Presenting the male body as a primary source of spectacle, both in action and at rest, the *peplum* genre highlights also the strategies, tensions and contradictions involved in this display.

Peplum Masculinity

Discussing Italian cinema during the fascist era (1922–1943), Giorgio Bertellini argues that the filmic celebration of the powerful male physique dates back to the Maciste series, centred on a giant-sized yet chivalrous strongman, produced from 1915 to 1926 (Bertellini, 2002, pp. 34–5). Classicist Maria Wyke’s exploration of the links between body culture and the classical tradition cites *Quo Vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912) as an earlier example: ‘A sense of honourable purpose was restored to the strongman [Ursus] whose body shape and associated virtuous acts were pitted against the decadence and languor of a grotesquely shapeless oppressor’ (Wyke, 2002, p. 361). Mere physical strength, however extraordinary, was insufficient. The male body had to be honed and shaped into an instrument of heroic action, further defined by its opposition to an antagonist whose physical inadequacy and unattractiveness were matched by their immoral character. This links with bodybuilding and, in particular, German showman Eugene Sandow, a star of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and probably the first celebrity strongman to emphasise muscular definition over sheer size or bulk (Blanshard, 2005, p. 153). The strong male body, and its classical associations, was later promoted by the Mussolini government, evoking a fascist aspect which I discuss below. As noted, the post-World War II Americanisation of Italy is also relevant to *peplum* masculinity, and I address this connection in my analysis of *Hercules*. At this point I will focus on more immediate factors in 1950s Italian society at the time of the film’s release.

As Liehm suggests, the overt escapism of the *peplum* genre can be seen as veiling a comment on harsh reality that links with issues relating to male physical strength (Liehm, 1984, p. 183). From the mid-1950s onwards, there were major structural transformations in Italian society, resulting from a greater applied scientific knowledge, a market-based industrial economy and the rise of the urban society (Sorlin, 1996, p. 115). This led to a period of mass internal migration in Italy, from the rural south to the industrial north. There was also a shift from labour based on physical strength—previously a source of economic value—to labour based on skill with machines (Dyer, 1997, p. 169). This change in labour requirements brought more women into the workplace, transforming their economic and social status, while men who offered only unskilled manual labour found their economic worth diminished.

This picture, though broadly accurate, requires qualification to avoid being overly schematic or simplistic. Social historians David Forgacs