



Steve Reeves, Sylvia Koscina, and Gabriele Antonini as Hercules, Iole, and Ulysses in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (*Hercules Unchained*). Note the “echoing effect,” as Iole and Ulysses appear as ever more diminished and “imperfect” versions of Hercules. Photofest

# Gentlemen Prefer Hercules: Desire | Identification | Beefcake

---

Robert A. Rushing

## **Anyone Here for Love?**

One of the most memorable sequences in Howard Hawks's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (US, 1953) is the musical number "Ain't There Anyone Here for Love?" Dorothy Shaw (Jane Russell) is accompanying her friend Lorelei Lee (Marilyn Monroe) to Paris on a cruise across the Atlantic. While Lorelei is romantically involved with a wealthy young man, Dorothy is single—and lonely for some company. So she is only too happy to find that the ship is filled with a team of handsome male athletes, bodybuilders, and gymnasts. As Dorothy asks in an earlier scene, "The Olympic team? For me? Now wasn't that thoughtful of somebody?" Her sense of triumph fades, however, once the voyage is under way. The athletes are in training and barely glance at her. The song's lyrics likewise revolve around this conflict between sports and sex: for instance, one stanza runs, "I'm apathetic / and nonathletic / Can't keep up in a marathon / I need some shoulders to lean upon / . . . Ain't there anyone here for love?" Love itself, of course, is figured as a

*Camera Obscura* 69, Volume 23, Number 3

DOI 10.1215/02705346-2008-011 © 2008 by *Camera Obscura*

Published by Duke University Press

kind of sport as the number continues, with Dorothy calling out “Doubles? Anyone? Court’s free! . . . Doesn’t anyone want to play?” At first glance, it might appear that the real conflict is between solitary sports (“physical culture” in particular, the contemporary term for bodybuilding) and Dorothy’s desire to play “doubles.” Since Dorothy has fully metaphorized sports as an expression of sexuality, there seems to be a concern that the bodybuilder and the gymnast, whose sports are principally solitary, may resist Dorothy’s more social—and clearly heterosexual—desire for coupling. In short, the anxiety the song plays with is that men who are devoted to the cultivation of their own bodies are expressing a narcissistic or even masturbatory sexuality that might derail the workings of normative heterosexuality. But there is more at work here.

We should note at the outset that the entire sequence is introduced by a shot of a crowd of adoring young women, delighted by the spectacle of masculine muscle being staged for them, before the film cuts to one particular viewer, namely Dorothy. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey pegs this as the standard technique in classic Hollywood cinema for structuring identification and desire—we usually see a crowd of men watching a female singer or dancer, before we cut to one particular man watching, our protagonist.<sup>1</sup> In that moment, our gaze is aligned with the man watching (identification—we occupy a position structurally identical to his), and our desire is the same as his (to see what he wants to see, the woman’s body). It is, of course, the inversion of genders in this sequence from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, along with the comical failure of the whole scenario, that gives the sequence its campy force and comic appeal. The choreography was done by Jack Cole, who was known for his homoerotic appreciations of the male form, and it suggests that the men are not so much uninterested in Dorothy as they are, perhaps, interested in each other. The sexually provocative postures the men assume are not the kind that are presumably aimed at heterosexual women, particularly when the athletes form two lines and begin rhythmically thrusting their rear ends into the air. This suggests that the comic threat to heterosexuality is less the narcissism of the bodybuilder than his concealed desire to look at exquisitely sculpted

male bodies—and by extension, the male viewer’s desire to see the same spectacle.

A subtext lends support to the homoeroticism: the sequence relies on a series of references to ancient Greece. To begin with, the team of athletes is the Olympic team, but this is reinforced by one of the opening images of the “Ain’t There Anyone Here for Love?” sequence: a gymnast spinning in slow circles on a bar in front of a wall decorated by an enormous image of a Greek warrior. The Greek subtext appears again in a brief sequence of Greco-Roman wrestling—and now we understand that the tan-colored, skintight shorts are in fact supposed to suggest the original condition of Greek wrestlers: naked. Finally, Dorothy’s song also contains two references to ancient Greece (references that also speak to sports and bodybuilding). Dorothy “can’t keep up in a marathon” and needs “some chappy / To make [her] happy / And he don’t have to be Hercules.”

And here we seem to have the central quandary: if our culture of athleticism, sports, the Olympics, bodybuilding, and all the rest comes to us from ancient Greece, how can it not simultaneously invoke the same-sex desire that is so strongly associated with that culture? Particularly when certain aspects of athleticism, especially in the case of physical culture, seem to speak to a rejection of conventional forms of heterosexuality in which men are those who look and women are those who are to be looked at? *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* can easily dismiss this problem—Greek athleticism and homoeroticism in this film are confined to this one sequence, largely undone at the end, and the rest of the principal men, although relatively flat characters, enjoy both an untroubled heterosexuality and a total lack of interest in sports. Such was not true, however, of a curious genre that enjoyed a brief, although powerful, popularity just a few years after this film’s release: the Italian peplum, or sword-and-sandals movie.

Beginning principally with *Le fatiche di Ercole* (*Hercules*, dir. Pietro Francisci, Italy/Spain, 1958), the peplum enjoyed a vogue that lasted until the mid-1960s. Its influence continues, with its emphasis on spectacular action and a spectacular male body, to inflect contemporary films.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I want to address the

peplum generally, since it is not well known, but also to discuss specifically how the peplum handles the “problem” of its obviously nonheteronormative attractions: well-oiled and nearly naked body-builders, typically featured as charismatic leaders of all-male bands of devoted and adoring followers. These attractions are a problem insofar as they are both obvious and, in some sense, impossible. One perplexed critic, Michèle Lagny, asks, “Is this done to appeal to women spectators? Or . . . is it a way of alluding to the delights of censured homosexuality?” But this question is not easily answered, precisely because peplum films were designed to appeal to a male audience (with constant displays of strength and violence), and their popularity indicates that they were clearly not consumed by exclusively or even predominantly gay audiences.<sup>3</sup> David Chapman, the author of *Retro Stud*, notes that the American release of *Le fatiche di Ercole* featured a massive ad campaign “targeting . . . the American male,” which took out full-page ads in 132 magazines, including “just about every national men’s periodical.”<sup>4</sup> Of particular interest for my purposes is that the marketing campaign also specifically targeted teens and preteens: Dell Comics, for example, “quickly produced a comic-book version of the film” to attract the youth audience (12). Peplums appear to have been consumed primarily by heterosexual, adolescent male viewers, an audience that would seem to have needed some way of negotiating the highly visible and eroticized spectacle of the male body that these films traditionally presented.<sup>5</sup>

### The Peplum

In 1914, Giovanni Pastrone directed the silent epic *Cabiria* (Italy), a key work in early cinema that strongly influenced D. W. Griffith and others. One of the actors in the film was Bartolomeo Pagano, a brawny dockworker who Pastrone cast as Maciste, a loyal slave belonging to the film’s principal Roman character. Maciste was an enormous hit and went on to star in dozens of films in the teens and twenties, including *Maciste poliziotto* (*Maciste the Policeman*, dir. Roberto Roberti, Italy, 1917), *Maciste innamorato* (*Maciste in Love*, dir. Luigi Borghetto, Italy, 1919), *Maciste contro lo sceicco* (*Maciste*

*against the Sheik*, dir. Mario Camerini, Italy, 1925), and many more. These films eschewed certain realist expectations: Maciste seems to have always been everywhere, appearing as an early-twentieth-century mountain climber as well as a Roman slave. His interventions are equally unbounded by space, as he moves from Italy to Japan, China, Argentina, the Middle East, Mexico, Africa, America—even to hell in *Maciste all'inferno* (*Maciste in Hell*, dir. Guido Brignone, Italy, 1925). I should be clear that numerous early films starred strongmen; in Italy, as elsewhere, this was one of the pieces of vaudeville that early cinema inherited, and it would be a mistake to think that it ever went away. From Johnny Weissmuller in the Tarzan and Jungle Jim films during the 1930s and 1940s to Vin Diesel, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the Rock, we do not lack for proof that the bodybuilder is a permanent fixture of the cinema (particularly of the fantastic) even today. But the arrival of Pietro Francisci's *Le fatiche di Ercole* promised something different: a genre.<sup>6</sup>

As many as three hundred peplum films were made in Italy or as Italian coproductions from about 1957 to 1965, and very quickly a series of generic conventions and expectations developed.<sup>7</sup> Although the films were made predominantly in Italy, they invariably starred, or at least pretended to star, an American or an English bodybuilder in the principal role (Italian strongmen used assumed names such as “Alan Steel” [actually Sergio Ciani] or “Kirk Morris” [*né* Adriano Bellini]). Although the initial set of peplum films was loosely—but clearly—based on literary sources, the bulk of these works took one of a handful of characters and sent them on increasingly exotic adventures: Hercules, Maciste, Samson, Jason, Ursus, Goliath, and a few others.<sup>8</sup> In the American versions, almost all of these characters became Hercules (or “son of Hercules” on late-night television). All of the peplums show a propensity for hybridity, for mixing characters, locales, and temporalities. In the earliest peplums we see Ulysses fighting alongside Hercules, but in later films it is not unusual to see Hercules battling the biblical Samson, as in *Sansone* (*Samson*, dir. Gianfranco Parolini, Italy/France, 1961), or a four-way combat between Hercules, Samson, Ursus, and Maciste, as in *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus gli*

*invincibili* (*Samson and the Mighty Challenge*, dir. Giorgio Capitani, Spain/Italy/France, 1964). The heroic strongman fights Zorro in one film (*Zorro contro Maciste* [*Samson and the Slave Queen*, dir. Umberto Lenzi, Italy, 1963]) and in another, even the three stooges (*The Three Stooges Meet Hercules*, dir. Edward Bernds, US, 1962). This hybridity extended to genres as well. Peplums could easily incorporate horror, as in *Ercole al centro della terra* (*Hercules in the Haunted World*, dir. Mario Bava and Franco Properi, Italy, 1961), *Maciste contro il vampiro* (*Goliath and the Island of Vampires*, dir. Sergio Corbucci and Giacomo Gentilomo, Italy, 1961), or *Ursus, il terrore dei kirghisi* (*Hercules, Prisoner of Evil*, dir. Antonio Margheriti, Italy, 1964). Some peplums bring in science fiction, as was the case with several of the Atlantis-themed films such as *Il conquistatore di Atlantide* (*Conqueror of Atlantis*, dir. Alfonso Brescia, Italy/Egypt, 1965) or *Il gigante di Metropolis* (*The Giant of Metropolis*, dir. Umberto Scarpelli, Italy, 1961). In at least one case, the peplum met the spaghetti Western halfway, in *Sansone e il tesoro degli Incas* (*Hercules and the Treasure of the Incas*, dir. Piero Pierotti, West Germany/Italy, 1964).<sup>9</sup>

In spite of its generic flexibility, the peplum is also highly structured. Certain scenes are very nearly obligatory and are repeated in almost every film. These have little to do with the mythological basis of the films and much to do with showcasing the physique of the protagonist: he uproots a tree and swings it against his enemies; he wraps chains around the pillars of a building and pulls it down; he wrestles with a dangerous wild animal such as a lion or a tiger and subdues it; he lifts one of his opponents into the air and uses him as a weapon against the others. The hero must assume pose after pose to showcase his muscles, even when he is ostensibly relaxing. Leon Hunt notes the “transparent narrative pretexts” that are provided to display “those well-oiled pectorals” in a series of “‘classic’ bodybuilding poses which bear little or no relation to the script.”<sup>10</sup> He must also, of course, be clothed in a manner that shows off his physique—hence the name of the genre, the *peplum*, the loose-fitting, one-shouldered toga (but one should note that the peplum was an article of *female* clothing in ancient Greece).<sup>11</sup> Very quickly, however, the hero takes off his peplum in favor of more revealing costuming: at times, the hero appears

to be wearing nothing so much as a miniskirt or a cloth diaper. In *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan* (*Samson and the Seven Miracles of the World*, dir. Riccardo Freda, Italy/France, 1961), as in many of the peplums that are set in “exotic” locales, this produces an extravagantly bizarre juxtaposition: our six-foot-three hero (the bodybuilder Gordon Scott), wearing nothing but a bright red diaper, moves among medieval Chinese peasants who take no notice of the giant, naked white man in their midst; seventeenth-century Scottish Presbyterians seem equally nonplussed by a nearly nude athlete sporting an impressive Elvis bouffant (Kirk Morris) who shows up at their witch burning in the 1962 *Maciste all'inferno* (*The Witch's Curse*, dir. Riccardo Freda, Italy); Hercules is equally ignored by pre-Columbian Incas in *Ercole contro i figli del sole* (*Hercules against the Sons of the Sun*, dir. Osvaldo Civirani, Italy/Spain, 1964).<sup>12</sup>

These examples are comic, but they mask a serious point: a good deal of criticism was devoted (especially in the 1990s) to the “tendency of Hollywood action cinema towards the construction of the male body as spectacle,” a spectacle that is often built on scenes of sadistic torture.<sup>13</sup> Such scenes provide a convenient excuse for the display of the male body (they work neatly within the diegesis as proof of the antagonist’s evil), while also marking such displays as erroneous, unnatural, or “wrong,” a mistake that the protagonist will eventually correct (see Ina Rae Hark, who notes that similarly spectacular scenes of female bodies go unremarked).<sup>14</sup> In the context of Italian popular genre films, scenes of sadistic torture that exhibit the body are exceedingly common, from the spaghetti Western—where the torture and mutilation of the male body is a staple—to the *giallo*, or horror film, where either sex (but preferentially women) may be put sadistically on display. One of the keys to understanding the Italian peplum is the acknowledgment that such scenes are rare and never form the foundation for displays of the male body. The male body is on display immediately and continuously throughout the film, and in ways that “transpire unremarked in the diegesis,” as Hark notes of women in the Hollywood Greco-Roman or biblical “spectacular” (152). In other words, the theoretical apparatus erected to explain displays of the male physique in, say, the *Rambo* films of the 1980s



will not work for the peplum, whose sexual universe is astonishingly comfortable with spectacular displays of both sexes' bodies, but especially men's.

It is rare in the peplum if a problem cannot be solved by physical strength. Although some problems in the central section of the film may be solved by cleverness or skill, the climactic sequences always feature a demonstration of truly gargantuan strength, ranging from Hercules toppling a building in *Le fatiche di Ercole* to Samson, buried underground, causing a massive earthquake as he breaks out of his tomb in *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*. Both Richard Dyer and Maggie Günsberg have speculated that this absolute faith in the power of muscle is related to the rapid industrialization of Italy during the 1950s and 1960s, in which rural workers had to abandon traditional agricultural manual labor and move to unfamiliar positions in manufacturing and industry, where a whole set of new skills appeared to be called for.<sup>15</sup> In this view, the peplum represents a kind of proletarian fantasy, a universe that is still comprehensible and unfragmented by modernity. I will return to this point later in a more psychoanalytic vein, although it is worth pointing out that this dream of an organic society unfragmented by modernity was also a dream of Italian fascism.

Critics have, of course, made the same claim about the action film. Both genres "present physical strength and dexterity as the solution to social conflicts," as Mark Gallagher notes, in a world "that severely limits . . . the bourgeois male's ability to establish his identity through physical activity."<sup>16</sup> Both also frequently target adolescent males, an audience presumed to be largely white and heterosexual. But there are several key differences between the peplum and the action film as well (not the least of which is that peplum films may not, as Dyer and Günsberg suggest, be addressed to a middle-class audience). Action films tend to rely on displays of violence, while graphic violence at least is quite rare in the peplum, which prefers to focus on spectacular scenes of strength. And while Gallagher claims that 1990s action films increasingly adopt an unrealistic, ironic, and postmodern aesthetic, in contrast to an earlier, more realistic era, peplum films were never realistic. Their fantastic (sometimes surreal) atmospheres are not at all ironic. And

while contemporary action films frequently appear to be based on the emotions of anger and resentment, peplum films are almost entirely bound up in wonder and admiration.<sup>17</sup>

As a genre, the peplum presents at least two other features worthy of note. First, almost every peplum's plot revolves around a crisis in political legitimacy. In *Le fatiche di Ercole*, for example, the legitimate king was murdered by his brother ten years earlier, and Hercules has the task of restoring the legitimate king's son to the throne—Hamlet gets a brawny helper. In *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*, the proper Chinese rulers, the children of the emperor, are being manipulated by the evil Mongols who have usurped their authority. These plots typically rely on a vague, romantic nationalism; the usurpers are generally foreign in some way or being manipulated by foreign agents. Like the cowboy or the classic detective, the strongman arrives from the outside. He is not invested in the political struggle personally but fights to restore legitimacy out of an ethical commitment—he sets things right and then rides off into the sunset.<sup>18</sup> In some peplums, he may be libidinally invested (an attractive princess loves him and needs to be saved), but, as in the Western, this investment is usually marginal to the plot and always unconvincing. Günsberg nicely calls the erotic action of the peplum “tokenistic and sketchy.”<sup>19</sup> In general, however, the peplum strongman stands largely outside both the political and the erotic action that unfolds during the film. This disinterested stance is, of course, what makes the peplum politically unthreatening, despite its proletarian fantasy of physical labor providing a kind of foundation to political legitimacy: the strongman has no interest in ruling, only in restoring rule to the proper leaders. Dyer notes that while the peplum is ostensibly antifascist (it turns to the Greeks rather than to Benito Mussolini's much-beloved Romans, for example), it deploys “structures of feeling” that are typical of fascism, in particular the idea that “the will of the people” is simply to be ruled by their proper (that is, racially correct) ruler.<sup>20</sup> The peplum nods toward democracy, but it is actually inclined to authoritarianism. Irmbert Schenk suggests that there is also a strong continuity between the first peplum cycle (of the teens and twenties) and fascism,<sup>21</sup> which seems generally clear (Mussolini seems to have modeled some of

his public poses on Maciste). I might suggest that the antifascism of the second peplum cycle is best described as reluctant—it maintains an untroubled belief in the heroic, infallible, and charismatic leader (namely Hercules), but it regretfully concedes that he cannot be the political leader.

The second noteworthy feature of the peplum is that it typically offers a heterosexual romance—yet one that does *not* involve the strongman—that is equally in crisis, frequently as part of the crisis in political legitimacy.<sup>22</sup> If the Prince of Atlantis must be restored to the throne that his uncle has usurped, for instance, Hercules may very well help him regain the throne, but he may also help our overly shy prince in his romance with the exotic Egyptian princess who happens to be visiting the Atlantic court. The “other man” in these films plays a decidedly secondary role to the strongman, of course, often functioning as a sidekick, but occasionally just playing the part of the “dude in distress.” It is not only his narrative function that is inferior to that of Hercules, however. He is frequently visually marked as slightly deficient rather than simply average in his masculinity—clean shaven, overly slender, vaguely feminine if not effeminate, with lighter hair. At times the hair is very visibly dyed in a manner that may suggest homosexuality, either latent or covert, especially when it is dyed red or streaked blond. The strongman, by contrast, almost always has dark brown or black hair, and he is instantly identifiable as Hercules if he also sports a beard. The “other man” (both when he plays the sidekick and when he plays the “dude in distress”)—Illo (Sandro Moretti) in *La vendetta di Ercole (Goliath and the Dragon)*, dir. Vittorio Cottafavi, Italy/France, 1960), Jason (Fabrizio Mioni) in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, and Kenamun (Angelo Zanolli) in *Maciste nella valle dei re (Son of Samson)*, dir. Carlo Campogalliani, Italy/France/Yugoslavia, 1960), for example—can be inclined to moodiness and melancholy and a lack of clear direction, also in his pursuit of the woman. He may also be overly ardent, like Theseus (George Ardisson) in *Ercole al centro della terra*, who pursues all women he sees. But he is still marked as symbolically deficient, blond, and weak: he cannot control his own behavior, his flirtation is compulsory, he repeatedly makes foolish decisions. Once Theseus falls in love, he becomes weepy,

sentimental, passive; once he loses his love, he becomes surly and sullen. The strongman is, of course, at all times decisive; he knows what he wants, handles women with ease, seizes the day.<sup>23</sup>

Alternatively, there may be a more or less subtle racialization of the sidekick: rather than being blond, he may have slightly darker skin and be marked as racially other. See, for example, Samson (Iloosh Khoshabe, but usually billed as “Richard Lloyd” or “Rod Flash”) in *Ercole sfida Sansone* (*Hercules, Samson, and Ulysses*, dir. Pietro Francisci, Italy, 1963), whose Middle Eastern appearance is heightened here; Cho in *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*, who is played by an Italian (Gabriele Antonini), but again with darker skin to indicate his half-Chinese race; and Prince Maytha (Giuliano Gemma) who looks convincingly Incan in *Ercole contro i figli del sole*. In all these films, however, the sidekick is visibly less masculine than the principal, and whiter, strongman. Even in a film in which the sidekick is also played by a bodybuilder, as with Samson in *Ercole sfida Sansone*, he is beardless, long-haired, markedly less assertive, and easily tricked or seduced by women.

It is not difficult to see that the strongman’s sidekick, this slightly-less-than-average male, is a kind of stand-in for these films’ primary audiences, especially outside Italy: young male adolescents. In short, the strongman typically forfeits his libidinal and political interests to rectify or repair those of others, and in the process he acts as a prop to legitimate those confused and protean adolescent interests as racially pure and heterosexual. The libidinal position of the strongman himself, however, may be a little harder to ascertain, as is, ultimately, that of the audience. Günsberg describes this with another apt phrase: “Episodes of illicit heterosexuality punctuate a homoerotic baseline . . . heterosexuality is constantly put on hold, denied and ultimately postponed until the final, cursory moments of closure.”<sup>24</sup>

All this brings us back to the questions I began with. What is the target of audience identification, and what is the target of audience desire? In Mulvey’s famous model, desire and identification in the classic Hollywood film are organized around two markedly separate axes: the film is structured to solicit *identification with* the male protagonist and *desire for* the female protagonist. The peplum

seems to be organized along markedly different lines: although it happily puts female bodies on display, it is much more interested in male bodies as objects of spectatorial desire. How does it accomplish this, all within a genre that was destined for, and principally consumed by, heterosexual adolescent males?

**“I Wanted You to Notice Me; I Want to Be Like You”**

Now I can return to the Greek athleticism and homoeroticism I began with. An early scene from *Le fatiche di Ercole* establishes these connections explicitly, and in precisely the way in which, I will argue, other peplums behave; that is, it is relatively forthright about activating same-sex desire, and yet it denies that it has done so. The scene is the training camp sequence that takes place in Iolco shortly after Hercules (Steve Reeves) has arrived, where we see dozens of young men training and vying for his notice; they “talk of nothing but Hercules.” The entire sequence is visually reminiscent of the “Ain’t There Anyone Here for Love?” number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, down to the leg-baring, tan-colored outfits worn by the athletes. But, in its own way, it is actually *more* explicit about how same-sex desire structures the film.

After the initial setup—an older man who cannot finish a marathon is taken away on a stretcher, and the other elders of Iolco are talking about the Hercules craze that has gripped the city and their fears that the sons may rebel against the authority of the fathers—the poet Orpheus (Gino Matterna) asserts that there is nothing to fear. He gestures upward, saying that one need only look at Hercules to be sure that there is no deceit or danger in him. The film cuts to a shot of Hercules atop a cliff, overlooking the training. This shot is remarkable. First, it presents a campy vision of gay erotica, with the massive, bearded Hercules flanked by the decidedly prettier twins Castor (Fulvio Carrara) and Pollux (Willi Colombini), scantily clad and well oiled, arranged precisely as if they were on an Olympic medal platform. But second, it presents the manly trio precisely as a spectacle, as something to be seen, to be admired (admiration is without a doubt the affective response that the peplum seeks more than any other). Let us note

that Hercules is only ostensibly overseeing the training. In reality, he has merely struck a dramatic pose, staring into space, literally “overseeing” (overlooking, looking over) the heads of the aspiring athletes, much as he will “oversee” the political and erotic action of the film: he will guide it but stand outside it. Those who are engaged in active gazing are, instead, the young men below. The scenario presented duplicates the conditions of the actual spectator in the movie theater: a host of young men looking up at a giant figure, blocked from them and inaccessible, very much presented as a spectacle. In short, Hercules’ body as spectacle commands our gaze, and this is a gaze that is saturated by same-sex desire. But at the same time, we are tricked into believing that this is the gaze of identification.

Lest we have any doubts, the next part of the sequence removes them. An eager and excited young man, handsome but slender and underdeveloped, more clever than strong—in short, the idealized version of the actual spectators of these films—rushes toward Hercules. With the help of a little pole vaulting, he realizes a quintessentially male fantasy: he passes through the barrier, the screen separating the audience and the object of desire. He arrives next to Hercules and explains, “I wanted you to notice me; I want to be like you.”<sup>25</sup>

This phrase, of course, aligns perfectly with Mulvey’s two axes: desire and identification. “I wanted you to notice me” is an eager adolescent declaration of love and articulates the desire of the spectator. “I want to be like you,” on the other hand, clearly speaks to identification. But most readers will also have noticed the non-parallelism, the inconcinnity, at work here. I *wanted* you to notice me; I *want* to be like you. The peplum concedes that it is driven by same-sex desire, but places that desire in the past, as something that is over. Instead, it prioritizes the question of identification, and it does so precisely by relocating—in a fantasy, of course—the spectator from his passive role as the one who gazes at the spectacle of Hercules’ body from below, from a place in the audience, to a place *alongside* the hero, in what John Ellis has characterized as “fetishistic looking” that abolishes the space separating viewer and viewed, the opposite of voyeurism.<sup>26</sup> This “togetherness,” this

alongsidedness, is in fact the prerequisite for identification, according to Mulvey, for now we can imagine that we will be doing what happens in the typical Hollywood film: looking at things along *with* the male hero. In the past, it may have been desire, but now it is identification. In fact, this slender adolescent who vaults up to Hercules is literally marked for identification—unlike Castor and Pollux, he wears a skirt that is nearly identical, in color and pattern, to the one worn by Hercules, and Hercules emphasizes his position alongside him: “Now you will stay *by my side* and I’ll teach you to fight.”

For some time—at least since Steve Neale’s essay “Masculinity as Spectacle”—we have recognized that identification and desire work in multiple and complex ways: audiences that enjoy the sadistic infliction of pain may simultaneously identify masochistically with the sufferer; the gaze of desire may fetishistically present itself as something else. In short, desire and identification function less as separate axes than as pneumatic or hydraulic flows, capable of moving in multiple and even contradictory directions at the same time. But even when there is clearly a “series of identifications . . . shifting and mobile . . . every film tends to specify identification in accordance with the socially defined and constructed categories of male and female.”<sup>27</sup> At least at this point in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, it is precisely the illusory shifting of desire into the past that allows the film to sustain normative heterosexuality—or at least, the illusion of it.

This structure, in which identification relocates a present psychic desire into the past (a past that is now phantasmatic, since the desire never was located there), is assuredly connected to the ways in which the peplum treats the actual history that gives it its stage. Let us briefly take two peplum “bookends”: the 1914 *Cabiria* and Zach Snyder’s *300* (US, 2007). *Cabiria* was released into a widespread anxiety about the failures of Italy’s colonial experiments, such as the Libyan disaster of 1911. It is relatively apparent that the film re-creates an ancient Roman victory (the Battle of Zama in 202 BC) to recast Libya as a success; more tellingly, it precipitates a contemporary desire (to blame someone else for the failure of the Libyan adventure) into the past. *Cabiria* imagines an originary

wrong that was done to the Romans—the abduction of the title character when she was a little girl—that justified Italian foreign policy circa 1914. As I have remarked elsewhere in an essay on the peplum and history, it is as if to say, “yes, perhaps colonialist exploitation is brutal, but after all, we had to save that little girl.”<sup>28</sup> Snyder’s *300* presses the modern peplum into similar work, imagining a cruel and authoritarian society (the Spartans) who turn out to be the only defenders of “freedom” (the freedom of infanticide and rape, evidently) against barbaric hordes from the East (the Persians) who wish to destroy their way of life. This, too, presses present-day desires (that, say, the invasion of Iraq might have been justified) into a phantasmatic past in which the Spartans actually quote members of the Bush administration to justify their call to war: “freedom isn’t free,” declares Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey). While the earliest and the most recent peplum films have projected desire into the past, theirs has usually been a desire emerging out of resentment. This is not true of the Italian midcentury peplum films, however, which instead use the past as a playground in which it is possible to imagine an entirely united, coherent people (radically unlike the economically, politically, and linguistically divided Italy of the late 1950s) and in which the only sour note is sounded by an other who intrudes from the outside (again, quite unlike the numerous and evident internal others of Italy in the midst of an unprecedented economic expansion).

The concealment of desire within identification provides an interesting contrast to the model Mulvey describes, which aims at rendering perfectly visible—and separate—identification and desire, both on-screen and for the spectator in the theater. This is also precisely what Judith Butler describes as initiating “heterosexual melancholy,” as same-sex desire is concealed within heterosexual identification. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler points to the recurrence of the figure of the “melancholic drag queen,” a common stereotyped image of the homosexual. Melancholy, she notes by turning to Sigmund Freud, is “the effect of an ungrrieved loss”;<sup>29</sup> no surprises here, since a suite of common images marks the homosexual as a tragic figure, ostracized from society, dying from AIDS, weeping for an “impossible love” with a straight man, and



so on. The homosexual is constituted as a field of loss—a childless existence, socially stigmatized, rejected by his or her family. Most crucially, the secret character of homosexuality prevents an open mourning for these losses. The homosexual cannot openly grieve what has been lost without a full acknowledgment of his or her sexuality, still structurally prohibited (don't ask, don't tell). What else is there to do but don a false happy mask (hence the garishly made-up drag queen) over the tears and perform, perform precisely the double layering of affect, the joyous celebration of the musical laid over the tragic kernel of gay subjectivity?

Butler, of course, wants to argue that *all* gender is a performance somewhat akin to drag, including normative heterosexual gender and sexuality.<sup>30</sup> Is all gender performance necessarily “melancholic,” allegorizing a loss it “cannot openly grieve” (235)? This is just what she suggests: “Drag allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize *gender*” (235; emphasis original). (And, nicely, it turns out that the tragic drag queen is simply performing more openly the secret that heterosexuals are always “keeping in the closet,” as it were.) That is, “drag exposes . . . the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibility of homosexuality, a foreclosure that produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time that it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love. Drag thus allegorizes heterosexual melancholy, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love” (235). Butler's argument has the advantage of explaining the “hyperbolic identifications” typical of heterosexuality: “The straight man *becomes* (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he ‘never’ loved” (236). In other words, it is precisely the foreclosure of same-sex desire, and the need to disavow that foreclosure as a kind of loss (“I *wanted* you to notice me”), that leads to an identification with heterosexuality, even to “hyperbolic identifications.” What makes the peplum so interesting is that these identifications are quite strong and explicit (“I want to be like you”), and yet the heterosexuality at work in the identification is so fraught and weak—after all, Ulysses is taking as his point

of identification a character whose erotic activity is, as is typical of the peplum world, “tokenistic and sketchy.” Identification and gender may be hyperbolic in the peplum, but sexual orientation is, if anything, “hypobolic.”

### **The Sidekick and Sexual Difference**

Naturally, the young man “alongside” his hero (“you will stay by my side and I’ll teach you to fight”) finds perfect expression in a figure who is named for this position, the sidekick.<sup>31</sup> The sidekick, as I suggested earlier, is always the actual target of viewer identification, in the sense of occupying the same structural position as the viewer, the one who gazes with desire—yet he is a sulky adolescent who always comes off worse in comparison: more sexually ambiguous, indecisive, and weaker. It should be clear that this is precisely one of the greatest pleasures of the peplum, namely, the ability to hold one’s own image in contempt, to misrecognize one’s own structural position within the text—the “kick” in sidekick. I have argued elsewhere that this is what takes place in detective stories that feature a sidekick: the sidekick is precisely the subject “presumed not to know,” just as the reader of the story does not yet know “whodunit.”<sup>32</sup> In both cases, we believe our point of identification is the heroic figure at the text’s center (brawny strongman or brainy detective), while we most closely resemble the skinny Ulysses or the clueless Watson. The trick is to get us to *enjoy* this misrecognition, an enjoyment intensified by our being able to project our least wanted attributes onto the sidekick.

We have already covered the obvious basis for this contempt toward the sidekick in the peplum—the sidekick’s comparative weakness, indecision, and uncertain sexual orientation. But the peplum manifests an increasing hostility toward the sidekick: he may be presented as a helpless figure of ridicule, magically dominated by an evil enchantress (as is Kenamun in *Maciste nella valle dei re*), or he may be actually mocked and abused by the strongman, as in *La vendetta di Ercole*, when Goliath (Mark Forest) endlessly ridicules his brother Illo for his sullenness and resentment, eventually tying him to a tree next to the family dog while everyone else

enjoys a celebratory feast. The contempt for the sidekick becomes even more apparent in those peplum films that reduplicate the sidekick into a third figure, even more diminished and ridiculed. In *Ercole al centro della terra*, this means that Hercules (Reg Park) and his sidekick, Theseus, are also accompanied by a short buffoon named Telemachus (Franco Giacobini), a coward and a weakling (of course the Homeric Telemachus is an emblematic figure of a retarded or incomplete manhood) who has no role in either the political or the erotic entanglements of the real heroes.

I have discussed earlier films in which the sidekick may himself be a strongman but is racially distinct from the white protagonist, as in *Ercole sfida Sansone*, typically producing a slightly less assertive and less masculine hero. In a few instances, however, this sidekick may be more radically racially other, like the West Indian bodybuilder Paul Wynter, who appears in *Maciste, l'uomo più forte del mondo* (*Mole Men versus the Son of Hercules*, dir. Antonio Leonviola, Italy, 1961). In that film, Bango (Wynter), the black man whom the hero saves from the Mole Men, immediately throws himself flat on the ground in front of the hero and places the hero's foot on his neck, swearing to be his slave. Here one can no longer precisely speak of a "sidekick," since the character refuses a position alongside the strongman in favor of one underneath him, producing a sidekick who is unusually dependent, incompetent, and desexualized. Dyer offers an excellent discussion of race in the peplum, of course, but I would hope to be able both to sustain a reading like Dyer's that insists on the peplum's contribution to the construction of whiteness and simultaneously not to overlook the fact that the peplum is busy constructing its spectator at the same time. Bango's prostration before *Maciste* (Mark Forest) speaks to the eminently subordinate position of the racial other in the peplum, but we should not lose sight of the way in which the sidekick's black skin can function as an exaggerated visual "echo" of the adolescent—and more likely white—spectator's own social insignificance and alterity, as well as of his willing avowal of admiring inferiority before the perfect physiques of Hercules, *Maciste*, and the rest.<sup>33</sup> In other words, this is at least as much a denial of racial difference as a recognition of it: everyone is more or less a shadowy



Kirk Morris and Iloosh Khoshabe (credited as “Richard Lloyd”) as Hercules and Samson in *Ercole sfida Sansone* (*Hercules, Samson, and Ulysses*). After spending much of the movie in conflict with each other, the two strongmen have here teamed up, performing the ritualizing feats of strength that are so typical of the peplum: throwing rocks, bending bars of steel, and the like. At the same time, Samson is indisputably secondary to Hercules in the film (and Ulysses once again appears as a secondary sidekick, weak and intellectual); Samson is both less masculine (none of the facial hair so typical of the peplum strongman) and less white than his Grecian counterpart. Photofest

reflection of Hercules; everyone is white, but some are less white. This logic, as we shall see shortly, emerges from the peplum's similar logic of sexual difference (and it is worth noting that Bango's immediate recognition of his own overwhelming inferiority is reminiscent of nothing so much as the little girl's automatic and intuitive recognition of her inferiority in Freud's essay on "anatomical consequences").<sup>34</sup>

In *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (*Hercules and the Captive Women*, dir. Vittorio Cottafavi, Italy/France, 1961), all these tendencies reach their logical and presumably ultimate conclusion: Hercules (Reg Park) must save his weak and indecisive son from an evil enchantress, bring him to his *proper* heterosexual object of desire, and do so while accompanied by a wisecracking but cowardly midget. (The midget as the secondary sidekick also appears in *La vendetta di Ercole*.) Here we can see the secondary sidekick for what it is: a line of reflections or shadows, each one progressively smaller, weaker, less masculine than the last, ever more abject in Julia Kristeva's sense of what the subject attempts to expel from itself, extending from Hercules down to a midget—presumably a midget with dyed blond hair. In short, as one moves away from the peplum's literally universal subject (Hercules is everywhere at all times in human history), one shrinks, becomes dark or pallid, more feminine. But all these differences, much like the endless variations in the peplum's time and geography, are always subject to the universal white, Western, male subject, one whose bodily perfection guarantees that he is free of deceit, as Orpheus claims. There is no depth to Hercules, just the play of light across his oiled and lightly tanned musculature.

The brilliance of the peplum's use and abuse of the sidekick is that the more he is presented in a debased, comic, humiliated, or abjected form, the more impossible it becomes for the spectator to recognize himself, the greater the pleasure in the spectacular misrecognition of the strongman as "me." Now, this is obviously a double pleasure: not only does the misrecognition of the strongman as the target of the viewer's identification enable the spectator to "miss" his own semblance in the sidekick but it also facilitates misrecognition of the film's same-sex desires. That is, classic Holly-

wood cinema rigorously maintains the separation of the axes of identification and desire; so if Hercules is the character with whom I identify (and the sidekick is obviously the object of my contempt), my *desire* must lie elsewhere. In short, the peplum facilitates the following misrecognitions in the spectator: I am not a passive spectator but an active participant, alongside the hero; I am not a sulky, moody, physically slight teenager but an ideal, assertive specimen of adult masculinity; I am not comically small but heroically large; I am not watching nearly naked, well-oiled, muscular men wrestling out of desire but rather out of identification.

In my list of misrecognitions, you might have noted that the spectator may explicitly disavow—as does the young pole-vaulter in *Le fatiche di Ercole*—same-sex desire.<sup>35</sup> That is not, of course, the same thing as avowing, explicitly or implicitly, heterosexual desire. Here we must attend to the end of the exchange between Hercules and the young Ulysses. For Hercules completes Ulysses' game of tense shifting:

ULYSSES: I wanted you to notice me; I want to become like you, Hercules!

HERCULES: And I'm sure you'll succeed if you have a strong will. . . . If you stay by me I'll teach you to fight—but not only with your arms. And someday, friends and enemies will know you as the wise one.

Hercules defers the day in which Ulysses' adult masculinity will come. The peplum is set in a universe that exists before a complete recognition of sexual difference and mortality, but shot through with constant premonitions that this recognition will come one day, if not now. Indeed, the chief source of the peplum's campiness lies precisely in its refusal fully to recognize sexual difference. In its exaggerated and yet desexualized versions of masculinity and femininity there is also a blurring; *both* men and women in the peplum wear scanty clothing and have shapely legs and big breasts; for all the men wearing miniskirts, the women may appear in male costume, either literally (as Agar [Anna Maria Polani], who disguises herself as a boy, in *Maciste e la regina di Samar* [*Hercules against the Moon Men*, dir. Giacomo Gentilomo, Italy, 1964]) or figuratively in positions of total dominance

(wicked women in the peplum have a magic power that allows them to control men: Samara's [Jany Clair] necklace in that same film, or Queen Omphale's [Sylvia Lopez] magic powder in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* [*Hercules Unchained*, dir. Pietro Francisci, Italy/France/Spain, 1959]).

For films with so many scantily clad men, however, there is no sense of genitalia—that is, the viewer's eye is drawn again and again to the same feature of Hercules, and it is not his bulging crotch; it is his chest. We might say, then, that these films present us with a fantasy of a phallic mother and a nursing father—a universe of total plenitude, where everyone has “it,” regardless of whether it is the paternal breast or the maternal phallus. In *Ercole sfida Sansone*, for instance, Delilah (the biblical seductress, played by Liana Orfei) attempts to entice Hercules (Kirk Morris), frolicking naked in a lily pond and inviting him to join in with her best “come hither” eyes and voice. Similar seduction scenes abound in the peplum, almost invariably ineffective, but this film is unusually clear in its deliberate refusal of any scenario so clearly based on adult sexuality. Hercules proudly holds up a dead bird instead: “I just caught this chicken! I think I'd better bring it over to your maids.” The disconnect could not be clearer, of course, nor could the image of Hercules as essentially a giant, albeit ferociously strong, baby.

I suggested earlier that I would be returning to the Marxist reading of the peplum, namely, that it presents for the manual laborer a universe that is still comprehensible and unfragmented by modernity. It is a world uncomplicated by machines or mechanical time. Hercules eats when he is hungry, sleeps when he is tired—and he is no good with machines, except perhaps at breaking them. (In an early scene in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, Hercules is unable to repair Princess Iole's broken chariot wheel—“I'm not much good as a carpenter,” he says; naturally, he solves the problem with brute force, which is always more effective than machinery in the peplum.) In essence, the peplum offers the same organic unity for its sexual universe. It is also constantly staging and restaging a psychic universe that is still comprehensible and unfragmented by

sexual difference—let alone sexual orientation. And here we can see how the peplum’s most evident feature, what Jacques Siclier has called its desire to “rêver sur le passé” (dream on the past), conceals in plain sight a desire to return to the subject’s past, to play out “une mascarade sans cesse” (an endless masquerade) where adults play dress-up as if they were children.<sup>36</sup> Simultaneously, of course, the peplum imagines that the actual historical past was something like this—an age of innocence, one peopled by buxom babes and brawny fellows united by their lack of interest in each other. No doubt this historical fantasy is also a projection of how the peplum imagines childhood as well—untroubled by sexuality, untroubled by modernity, untroubled by an awareness of death (Hercules’ universality and timelessness is also a sign of his immortality). *Le fatiche di Ercole* actually begins with Princess Iole’s flashback to the “innocent” days of her youth, days fractured by a double rupture that takes place when she is about thirteen years old. On the one hand, she becomes aware of mortality (she sees a prisoner on the road condemned to death and cannot stop thinking about it), and simultaneously the kingdom falls to an usurper, her own father, who murders her uncle. What is missing from this flashback, from these two bloody events, is a third bloody event that must have taken place at about the same time—Iole “becomes a woman” with the onset of menstruation. Sexual difference is the last “fracture” that the peplum universe is willing to admit in its ceaseless masquerade, its adults still wearing costumes.

In the final sequence of *Maciste e la regina di Samar*, Hercules (Sergio Ciani) finally figures out how to end the threat of Selena (Anna Maria Polani), the moon men’s queen, and her indestructible rock men army—he casts down a statue. This breaks the spell of the “Mountain of Death,” and the omnipotent female villain disintegrates along with her stone servants. What Hercules casts down is the only entirely naked body I have ever seen in a peplum. It is a primitivist statue of an adult female body, and in the last moment as it pitches over, one can just glimpse the genital region. This is, if you like, the peplum’s defense against the displeasure-inducing anxiety produced by woman in classic Hollywood film,



according to Mulvey.<sup>37</sup> It relocates the viewer into a universe *before* the fall, before the discovery and complete recognition of sexual difference. Sexual difference will be cast down, disavowed, and the fate of the peplum universe literally depends on it.

This is why peplum films so often end with a fall, a casting down, from the female statue in *Moon Men* to the building-shattering earthquake in *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*. At the end of the film, the hero, our ostensible point of identification, typically receives the thanks and gratitude of the populace and of the heterosexual couple he has secured. Then he withdraws into some other corner of the peplum universe, where he will secure yet another tenuous glimpse of sexual difference, cast down yet another phallic mother, and withdraw once again.<sup>38</sup> One can see that the hero is essentially a heterosexual colonizer or gentrifier of this prepubescent universe, but one who is simultaneously painting himself into a corner—he constantly runs the risk of completing this transformation, of fully converting the world, of running out of psychic frontier. And so we can begin to understand the most apparently illogical and bizarre feature of the peplum, namely, its tendency to leap from setting to setting, time to time, continent to continent, always in search of some new space. From Athens to Thebes to Troy to ancient Egypt to czarist Russia and the Mayan Empire, from Greek myths to the Bible to territories that are purely fantastic—Samar, Atlantis, worlds where Samson fought alongside Hercules, where the two fought each other, where they teamed up against Ulysses.

In short, the peplum is effectively negotiating an imaginary reconciliation of the multiple deadlocks of sexual difference, desire, and orientation, including the wish to avoid, at least for a little while, foreclosing on an ambiguous, potentially same-sex desire, a foreclosure that leads to Butler's heterosexual melancholia, the literally unspeakable grief over what one has had to give up when one takes on heterosexuality. In a beautiful example, in *Le fatiche di Ercole*, the main palace in Jolco is decorated with hanging tapestries, tapestries whose images can only be partially seen through the classical columns that support the palace. One

of the tapestries (visible, for example, when Hercules is confronted by the king after his son is killed by the Nemean Lion) depicts a young man, a warrior—and a hand touching this young warrior’s crotch. This detail on the tapestry is almost unnoticeable, yet it is not so much concealed as it is hidden in plain sight. The identity of this other hand, however, is left in doubt, concealed from the camera by a nearby column. At the end of the film, however, we will return to this location, and Hercules will pull down the supporting columns with his chains. As the buildings collapse, we will glimpse that heterosexual future revealed—we can now see that the hand in fact belongs to a maiden—but from a distance, as we withdraw back into the peplum’s fantasy. The desires and choices of the post-Oedipal subject will increasingly follow an exclusive logic of either-or, an incipient pressure on the adolescent and largely heterosexual viewers of the peplum to enjoy the male body, *while they still can*. This is precisely the reason that the peplum focuses so much more on the spectacle of the desirable male body than on that of the woman—*that* desire, for the woman’s body, is a pleasure that the majority of the peplum viewers will not have to renounce. In the peplum, we can still imagine a universe in which we stay by Hercules’ side. In *that* universe, gentlemen prefer brunettes—with beards.

## Notes

Numerous colleagues have given me feedback and suggestions on this work, for which I am very grateful. I would be remiss if I did not mention, at a minimum, Pat Gill, Lilya Kaganovsky, Michael Rothberg, Manuel Rota, Jim Hansen, Jed Esty, and Dara Goldman here at Illinois, and Marco Ruffini, Jane Winston, Scott Durham, and Ed Muir at Northwestern University, where I presented some of this material in a talk. I also thank my reviewers at *Camera Obscura*, including Sharon Willis, for their many insightful suggestions.

1. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 203–4.

2. Peplum titles are generally confusing, since English-language versions often used “translations” that differed radically from the original Italian. A case in point is *Maciste e la regina di Samar* (dir. Giacomo Gentilomo, France/Italy, 1964), which is literally “Maciste and the Queen of Samar”—a fairly typical peplum title. However, the American release aimed both at a more recognizable hero and at a science-fiction ambience: *Hercules against the Moon Men*. Moreover, there were often three or four English titles, as films were released and re-released with attempts to appeal to different audiences and were ultimately shunted off to late-night television—frequently with a brand-new title.
3. Michèle Lagny, “Popular Taste: The Peplum,” in *Popular European Cinema*, ed. Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London: Routledge, 1992), 171.
4. David Chapman, *Retro Stud: Muscle Movie Posters from around the World* (Portland, OR: Collector’s Press, 2002), 12. I own a period lobby card for *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (*Hercules and the Captive Women*, dir. Vittorio Cottafavi, Italy/France, 1961), which, despite the risqué title, carries a sticker announcing the time of the “kid’s show.” Perversely, another poster, for the equally tame *La vendetta di Ercole* (*Goliath and the Dragon*, dir. Vittorio Cottafavi, Italy/France, 1960), carries a sticker informing that the film was “classified by the Ontario Board of Censors” as “adult entertainment.” As I will suggest, this is a central confusion of the peplum universe: it does not know whether it is for boys or for men precisely because its supersized stars push it toward adult men (or even supermen), while its steadfast refusal to recognize sexual difference—as I argue at the end—locates it in the realm of prepubescence or early adolescence.
5. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), for a look at a different genre (horror) also principally consumed by adolescent males who had to negotiate a series of identifications that were not (or were not exclusively) heteronormative.
6. *Le fatiche di Ercole* marks a somewhat arbitrary starting point for the peplum. The director had made other fantastic, epic films in the years before, and the precursors to the peplum obviously extend back to the very earliest days of cinema. What is clear,

however, is that the enormous popularity of the 1958 film created a genre, with all of its recognizable tics, structures, and repetitions.

7. Both Maggie Günsberg in *Italian Cinema: Gender and Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997) and Richard Dyer in *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997) give 1957 to 1965 as the conventional dates for the peplum, and while M. Domenico Cammarota in *Il cinema peplum (Peplum Cinema)* (Rome: Fanucci, 1987) does not give either a beginning or an end, he lists only a handful of films made after 1965, some of which are parodies. Michèle Lagny cites “the late 1940s to early 1960s” as the second “golden age” for the peplum (“Popular Taste,” 163). Christopher Wagstaff gives the number of three hundred peplum films (“Cinema,” in *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 216–32). David Chapman claims two hundred in *Retro Stud*. Wagstaff is probably the most reliable of these sources, and while the number three hundred may seem surprising, it was dwarfed by the number of spaghetti Westerns turned out in the years following the collapse of the peplum’s popularity. The peplum continues, of course, in films like *Clash of the Titans* (dir. Desmond Davis, US, 1981), currently being remade for a possible 2010 release, and recent television series such as *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), although the peplum craze died off rapidly after 1965. One cannot ignore the resurgence of American films set in mythic antiquity starring beefy protagonists, from *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott, UK/US, 2000) to *Troy* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, US, 2004) to *300* (dir. Zach Snyder, US, 2007) and *Beowulf* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, US/Malta/UK, 2007). These last two use computer graphics to augment their protagonists’ musculature, a shortcut that was unavailable to Steve Reeves and Gordon Scott. *Beowulf* actually uses CG to create a completely new body for its protagonist.
8. Lagny makes the obvious point that peplum films are not historically accurate (“Popular Taste,” 167–68); this point seems too obvious to contest (they conflate battles, scenes, characters, and so on, as well as introducing obvious anachronisms), but it misses how surprisingly faithful they are for a popular and explicitly populist genre.

9. See Karine Lannut, “Le péplum fantastique” (“The Fantastic Peplum”), in *CinémAction* 89 (1998): 72–74. Lannut notes that the “univers délirant [du] péplum fantastique” (the delirious universe of the fantastic peplum) is a “grande spécialité italienne” (great Italian specialty) and points to the numerous Italian peplums featuring zombies, vampires, science-fiction settings, and so forth. She also describes the science fiction as more like a “paléo-science-fiction” and calls these works “curieux films hybrides” (curious hybrid films). In that same issue, Gérard Dessere takes up a similar topic in “Vagabondage du péplum dans les autres genres” (“The Peplum Wanders through Other Genres”), *CinémAction* 89 (1998): 84–90. There were very few Western-peplum hybrids, but numerous bodybuilders who had been part of the peplum craze went on to work in spaghetti Westerns, as did those directors who could manage the transition—including Sergio Leone.
10. Leon Hunt, “What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic,” in *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies, and Men*, ed. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 70.
11. For the etymology of the word, see Claude Aziza, “Le mot et la chose” (“The Word and the Thing”), *CinémAction* 89 (1998): 7–11. The pedantically correct plural of peplum is, in fact, *pepla* (it was a neuter noun in Latin, and the Greek original is *peplon*). Aziza notes that it originally referred to “un vêtement féminin” (a female article of clothing) but is pleased, tongue in cheek, to find a citation showing that it particularly referred to the garment worn by Pallas Athena, an appropriately androgynous figure—“elle avait quelque chose de viriloïde qui, à y bien réfléchir, s’accorderait assez bien . . . avec l’équivoque qu’entretiennent dans les films ces corps masculins trop bien polis” (she had something virile about her that, on further consideration, would go quite nicely along with the ambiguity that those too-polished male bodies present in the films) (7–8). Precisely speaking, the word *peplum* is used in France and Italy to refer generally to all cinema of classical, biblical, or Egyptian antiquity, but I have used it here to refer to the midcentury Italian films starring bodybuilders, since that is how it is used in English.

12. Dyer—quite rightly—makes much of race in the peplum, and of those moments in which racial tension and racial difference are most apparent. It is worth noting, however, how frequently race is *not* a factor, how it magically and impossibly—fetishistically, in fact—disappears. In the 1960 *Maciste nella valle dei re* (*Son of Samson*, dir. Carlo Campogalliani, Italy/France/Yugoslavia), the same kind of invisible cultural and racial incongruity appears; the nearly naked, giant white hero strolls casually amid a crowd of Egyptians dressed in “traditional” costume—he goes unnoticed. The logic of the peplum is essentially—as I will show later—prepubescent: it does not yet *fully* recognize difference, either sexual or racial. Hence the “men in miniskirts” with enormous chests are matched by the women in miniskirts—also with enormous chests.
13. Yvonne Tasker, “Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the Body, and the Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (New York: Routledge, 1993), 230. This link between male display and sadomasochistic scenes of torture is made frequently, from Tasker to Hark (see below), and by Steve Neale in the same volume. See Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,” in Cohan and Hark, *Screening the Male*, 13. See also, of course, David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).
14. Ina Rae Hark, “Animals or Romans: Looking at Masculinity in *Spartacus*,” in Cohan and Hark, *Screening the Male*, 152.
15. Dyer, *White*, 168–69; Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, 97.
16. Mark Gallagher, “I Married Rambo: Spectacle and Melodrama in the Hollywood Action Film,” in *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 210, 199.
17. Martin Fradley, “Maximus Melodramaticus: Masculinity, Masochism, and White Male Paranoia in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema,” in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (New York: Routledge, 2004), 235–51. See also Gallagher, “I Married Rambo,” 199–226.

18. Dyer notes that, in its reliance on the intervention of the white hero into a series of exotic locales, the peplum is precisely “post-colonial,” and he makes an excellent argument for why the peplum is deeply imbricated in the discourses of coloniality (*White*, 155–61).
19. Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, 107.
20. Dyer, *White*, 169.
21. Irmbert Schenk, “The Cinematic Support to National(istic) Mythology: The Italian Peplum 1910–1930,” in *Globalization, Cultural Identities, and Media Representations*, ed. Natascha Gentz and Stefan Kramer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 153–68.
22. See, for instance, Derax and Billis in *Maciste e la regina di Samar*, Cho and Lei-Ling in *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*, Kenamun and Nofret in *Maciste nella valle dei re*, Illus and Thea in *La vendetta di Ercole*, Idar and Moah in *Maciste contro i mostri* (*Fire Monsters against the Son of Hercules*, dir. Guido Malatesta, Italy, 1962).
23. All of this is already true in the earliest peplum, the 1914 *Cabiria*: the strongman may be the sidekick, but the central character, Fulvius Axilla (Umberto Mozzato), is physically small and weak, indecisive and prone to giving up at the slightest sign of difficulty. The strongman, Maciste (Bartolomeo Pagano), at times just picks up Fulvius and carries him, and at the end of the film he serenades Fulvius and Cabiria (Carolina Catena) to cement their romantic union.
24. Günsberg, *Italian Cinema*, 108.
25. The young man is identified later as Ulysses (Gabriele Antonini). We should note the subtle presentation of a nascent Oedipal conflict: all the older men, including his father, Laertes (Andrea Fantasia), are concerned that they are losing the loyalty of their sons to Hercules, and Ulysses will express his disapproval of his father’s womanizing later in the film.
26. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1982), 47.
27. Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle,” 11.

28. See Robert Rushing, “Memory and Masculinity in the Italian Peplum Film and Zach Snyder’s *300*,” in *Culture et mémoire (Culture and Memory)* (Paris: Presses de l’École Polytechnique, 2008), 244.
29. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 234.
30. I am fudging on several points here for the sake of clarity: Butler is actually very reluctant to use drag as a model for gender performance for a number of reasons, but particularly because it suggests that we have a “voluntary” relationship to gender, that we can perform it or not at will, or perform *this* gender rather than *that* gender as we like. She is adamant that this is not the case (although it is interesting that she has to keep returning to this inadequate and insufficient model of drag to make her points). Second, I am fudging the terms *gender* and *sexuality* here, in part because Butler does a bit as well. They are obviously not necessarily parallel, do not line up neatly, and although Butler always discusses gender performativity, she is also often talking about the performance of sexuality as well.
31. In Italian, the term for sidekick is slightly more ambiguous—*spalla* literally means “shoulder.” While *spalla* suggests one who stands to one side, it is also clearly someone who is behind you, the one who “has your back.”
32. Robert Rushing, *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture* (New York: Other Press, 2007), 153–57.
33. Not all racial others are treated as inferiors in the peplum—the Incas in *Ercole contro I figli del sole* are treated much the same as Hercules and are even hard to distinguish visually.
34. Sigmund Freud, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 19:248–58.
35. *Hercules* makes use of the story of Jason and the Argonauts—this is accurate insofar as Hercules was actually on the Argo and participated in the quest for the Golden Fleece. It is inaccurate insofar as it eliminates the key event in the journey for Hercules, namely, the loss of his male lover Hylas (a loss to heterosexuality—Hylas is seduced by a water nymph) and his



ensuing madness. This is typical of the peplum—it invokes scenarios that make explicit appeals to same-sex desire and then reworks them.

36. Jacques Siclier, “L’age du peplum” (“The Age of Peplum”), *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 131 (1962): 28.
37. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 203.
38. See *Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi* (*Atlas in the Land of the Cyclops*, dir. Antonio Leonviola, Italy 1961), *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*, *Hercules and the Princess of Troy* (dir. Albert Band, US/Italy, 1965), and *Maciste nella valle dei re*.

**Robert A. Rushing** is an associate professor of Italian and of comparative literature at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; he holds affiliate appointments in cinema studies and criticism and interpretive theory. His book, *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture*, appeared in 2007. He has also published on Alfred Hitchcock, Michelangelo Antonioni, Slavoj Žižek, psychoanalysis, and the television show *Monk*.



Steve Reeves as Hercules in a promotional still from *Le fatiche di Ercole* (*Hercules*). This is the idealized form of the strongman: assertive, direct, and full of life and energy. Photofest