

Space, Identity, and a Transnational Past: Rewriting European History in HBO's *Rome*

Given that my title promises much more than I'm realistically able to deliver in 20 minutes, I want to clarify what I mean by rewriting European history. My main arguments in this paper are twofold: First, I will argue that *Rome* works against conventional depictions of ancient Rome in epic films, so that rather than presenting history as a grand narrative, it is acknowledged as an accidental process. The second argument is that this particular depiction of history forestalls any neat parallels with the present, which means that the series cannot be used as what Anthony D. Smith calls a composite national mythology. I will conclude by suggesting that it is not so much an allegory for modern Europe, but a kind of benign anti-nationalism, with apologies to Michael Billig for misusing his term.

I want to begin, however, by discussing the ways in which *Rome* goes about trying to depict the past, and how this differs from traditional toga epics. To offer a comparable television series, *I, Claudius*, to which *Rome* has often been compared, the newer series presents a more complex interplay between past and present not only because of what Jason Mittell calls "complex narratives" which stretch over episodes and seasons (Mittell 2006), but because the spectrum of characters has been broadened out to include non-aristocratic figures. In the case of *I, Claudius*, the series "focuses totally on personal relationships and palace politics emerging ultimately as the portrait of a highly dysfunctional family."¹ *Rome* takes the opposite approach to much (though not all) of its characterisation, concerning itself "as much with the lower classes as with the intrigues of the aristocracy. In this respect, *Rome's* very title is significant. Naming the series for a collective (the city) as opposed to a specific individual marks a departure from the tendency of the so-called historical epic of this sort to take a singular figure as its focus, such as with *Julius Caesar*, *Spartacus*, *Ben-Hur*, *Cleopatra* or *Gladiator*." (Lockett 2010: 104) Thus *Rome* offers "a counternarrative not just to the generic conventions of the 'toga movie', but the historical epic more generally. The series works consistently toward subtle dislocations of power and historical agency, traditionally located within individuals such as Caesar." (Lockett 2010: 104) This is the sort of "history from below" discussed by Marc Ferro, which forestalls the usual set scenes which offer the sorts of obvious parallels used so often to compare "them" to "us".² In order to establish how *Rome* differs in its conception of ancient Rome, it is worth also comparing the series to another dominant model, that of *Gladiator*, so I want to briefly demonstrate this key difference using two clips.

¹ Carl J. Mora, 'The Image of Ancient Rome in the Cinema', *Film-Historia*, VII (1997), 221–243 (p. 236).

² Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Wayne State University Press, 1988), chap. 16.

The first clip is *Gladiator*'s memorable scene in which the newly-crowned Commodus arrives back into the city of Rome. Note that here Rome is presented in a grandiose vision of surge and splendour, to quote Vivien Sobchack,³ using monuments, wide lenses, long takes and epic mise-en-scène, along with dark tones and suitably epic music, uses a traditionally epic aesthetic to tie Commodus back into a familiar vision of Rome. Now, if we compare this with a similar scene in *Rome*, the differences are striking, in terms of the focus, and the way in which the episode fits into overall story arcs. This last example, by its low-angle shots of non-iconic monuments, close-ups, quick cuts, and above all its placement of the camera within and partially obscured by the crowds places the spectator in amongst the crowds rather than viewing it from a spectacular vantage point, creating a rather literal interpretation of Ferro's history from below. *Rome* here demonstrates a view of history which privileges "historically marginalized and indeed historically invisible actants—namely women, plebs, and slaves" (Lockett 2010: 111). This focus on the Roman mob removes the subplots of national design and teleology to present a kind of history which needs no monuments, since the great and the good which they venerate are no significant "gamechangers", but instead they too (like the characters in close-up) are adrift on the tides of history.

Another example of how *Rome* offers "a counternarrative to generic conventions can be seen in the choice to include the perspective of "ordinary guy" characters such as Titus Pullo and Vorenus (the two plebeian stars of the series). The interplay between high and low is in evidence from the start. In the second episode of series one called, revealingly, "How Titus Pullo brought down the Republic", Pullo and Vorenus have accompanied Marc Anthony back to Rome in order to plead on behalf of Caesar in the Senate. So far, so *Gladiator*, since clearly what we have here is an example of the masses being used as unwitting pawns in a wider political process. What is important here though is that the mob becomes fragmented into 'ordinary' individuals who "by this rubbing together of the two worlds, between the elites and the plebs... create a unique dramatic friction that is unlike any other representation of the ancient world on screen".⁴ "As 'ordinary' Romans, Pullo and Vorenus more easily invite the audience into the grand historical account",⁵ offering viewers a close-up account of how history is made. After a brusque dismissal of Caesar's petition by the senate, Pullo leads Anthony and his bodyguards through the crowds. In this crowd stands one of Pullo's personal adversaries, a man whom he had cheated at dice in a local tavern; this man, seeing the opportunity for revenge, lunges at Pullo who instantly reacts violently. From the privileged perspective of the spectator in the crowd filmed by a constantly moving steadicam which is characteristic of the series,

³ Vivian Sobchack, 'Surge and Splendor: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic', *Representations*, 29 (1990), 24–49.

⁴ *Rome, Season One: History Makes Television*, ed. by Monica Silveira Cyrino (Blackwell Pub., 2008), p. 4.

⁵ Cyrino, p. 6.

we can see what the senators looking down from above cannot: that the attack is a personal one, not a political act. However, in order to make sense of it from above, the personal is mapped onto the political, and the violence is translated by both Pompeii and Anthony as an assassination attempt. It is in scenes like this (of which there are a great many) in which the personal and the political collide, that we can see history at work in *Rome* as a series of accidents in which the masses and the invisible “others” are as much a part of the process as the visible aristocracy in a vision of Rome where “the high and the low worlds of the city mingle together at street level”.⁶ *Rome’s* history is something which can only be ridden, and not driven; it is an accident which explains how we got from then to now, rather than a carefully planned teleology designed and executed by great men forging a nation.

This brings me to my second argument about how we identify the national, and indeed nationalistic, impulses traditionally associated with films depicting great moments from history. It is, of course, scarcely anything new to suggest that modern depictions of the past frequently are strongly tied to the present, an idea most prominently supported by Siegfried Kracauer in his argument that historical films reflect the collective cultural consciousness, and one carried forward by Pierre Sorlin.⁷ This is especially true in the depiction of ancient history, as Jeffrey Richards reminds us, since “...the Ancient World epics tell us as much about the preoccupations and values of the period in which they were made as about the period in which they were set.”⁸

However, one of the corollaries of this “past in the present” argument is that many scholars take this one step further to argue that historical films *use the past* to work through issues about the present, particularly in relation to violence and national identity.⁹ (de Groot 2009: 208). This is undoubtedly the case in many instances, the most obvious being *Spartacus*, in which blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo used some of the “name and shame” scenes to safely pillory those collaborating with McCarthyite Hollywood blacklisting.¹⁰ *Gladiator’s* screenwriter Franzoni openly acknowledged that “the movie is about us. It’s not just about ancient Rome, it’s about America”.¹¹

⁶ Cyrino, p. 6.

⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, trans. by Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton University Press, 2004). Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Blackwell, 1980).

⁸ Jeffrey Richards, *Hollywood’s Ancient Worlds* (London: Continuum, 2008), foreword.

⁹ Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 208.

¹⁰ For more on this relationship, see Frederick Ahl, ‘Spartacus, Exodus and Dalton Trumbo: Managing Ideologies of War’, in *Spartacus: film and history*, ed. by Martin M. Winkler (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), pp. 65–86; Cooper, ‘Dalton Trumbo Vs. Stanley Kubrick: The Historical Meaning of Spartacus’, in *Spartacus: film and history*, ed. by Martin M. Winkler (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), pp. 56–64. See also Steve Neale’s excellent article

Such a use of the past recalls Anthony D. Smith's suggestion that one way of constructing national identity is "through the use of history and, especially, the cult of golden ages ... To do so, moral exemplars from the ethnic past are needed, as are vivid recreations of the glorious past of the community. Hence the return to the past through a series of myths: myths of origins and descent, of liberation and migration, of the golden age and its heroes and sages... Together, these myth-motifs can be formed into a composite nationalist mythology and salvation drama." (Smith 1991: 66)¹²

Unlike the histories of these 'composite national mythologies' *Rome* presents history's great men only as those able to capitalise most profitably on a given outcome. By tying these characterisations to spaces and not national monuments, furthermore, it is difficult to establish the Rome on display in this series as the prototype of modern nation-state. Where in *Gladiator* the senate which receives Commodus visually signals itself as Rome, the streets through which Octavian parades are visibly the same streets which Vorenus is later to police, which are populated by hired thugs, beggars and prostitutes. The traditionally invisible historical characters, such as slaves, women, the masses and foreigners, are made visible, revealing that power is exercised as much in the bedroom as on the senate floor, the graphic sex and violence serve to emphasise the extent to which the Roman empire relied for its power on the Other. If we remove the actions and effects of history's great men, and all history is chance and reaction, then it is difficult to see how this kind of past can be used to tell stories about the present, much less to map these nationalist ideals onto current concerns.

Consequently, the idea that *Rome* was trying to formulate a nationalist, usable past seems to me unlikely, for the chief reason that the series was the collaborative result of a tri-national co-production. As such, troubling questions emerge about how three different countries, each with their own "composite nationalist mythology" might possibly try to use this past to glorify their own history, especially as Bourdon notes that previous attempts to create pan-European identities through initiatives such as the European Broadcasting Union had so noticeably failed, claiming that attempts to use television for the "engineering of nationalism through mass ceremonies, the rediscovery (and invention) of a common past could not be practised on a European scale."¹³

Looking at the industrial context of the series' release, we discover that *Rome* was not only perceived as a different product in its three countries of origin, but its reception in all three was also

"Swashbucklers and Sitcoms, Cowboys and Crime, Nurses, Just Men and Defenders: Blacklisted Writers and TV in the 1950s and 1960s," *Film Studies*, no. 7 (Winter 2005): 83-103.

¹¹ Quoted in Monica S. Cyrino, "Gladiator and Contemporary American Society", in *Gladiator: Film and History*, ed. by Martin M Winkler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) pp. 124-49, p. 125.

¹² Anthony D Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 99.

¹³ Jérôme Bourdon, 'Unhappy Engineers of the European Soul: EBU and the Woes of Pan-European Television', *International Communication Gazette*, 69 (2007), 263-80 (pp. 264-5, p. 263).

substantially different. In terms of viewing figures alone, the UK debut on 2nd November 2005 received 7.02 million viewers (BARB), a record number for a midweek 9pm slot, and is even more staggering if compared to other BBC2 productions which, even in prime time, rarely exceed 5 million viewers. Compared to other channels, this works out at some 9.6% of the total network share (average 8.5%) and the debut even poached some of Jamie Oliver's viewers (bringing him down to 2.81million viewers for that week). Although on the surface the USA saw somewhat lower viewing figures in real terms (4m viewers), it must be recognised that HBO is a paid cable service which broadcasts to a far smaller core subscriber base than the national free-to-air channels of the BBC and Rai, meaning that the figures for HBO and BBC are broadly comparable. In the UK and USA, negative viewer reactions were also surprisingly low, despite the frequent full-frontal nudity, sex scenes and violence, and the regular and explicit use of marked language and profanity. In the US, this is most likely explained by Marc Leverette's claim that "profanity, violence and sexuality [... can be seen] as a cultural marker within HBO's brand identity."¹⁴ In the UK, a post-watershed schedule during the traditional mid-week lull, coupled with advance warning of the explicit content drew only 80 viewer complaints (compared with 174 for a 2002 retelling of the Nativity play) suggesting that vulnerable viewers were safely tucked up in bed.¹⁵

I want to finish by looking at the reaction in Italy, however, which was very different and telling. Having ploughed €4.5million into the series, Rai later removed substantial (and key) elements of the series for presentation to an Italian audience, with the first series cut so much that the first three episodes were collapsed into one single, hour-long broadcast. Eventually, a "parallel" version of the series—devoid of all adult content—was re-run in 2006 on Rai due on a Friday night, but series one was at last to be effectively killed off by switching it mid-season to a graveyard slot of 11pm, and series 2 was never broadcast on terrestrial television. Amid a storm of controversy over the severity of the cuts (with one website calling it "censorship as usual"), a press statement issued by Rai initially tried to defend its cuts on moral grounds, claiming that there was too much profanity, nudity, sex and violence.¹⁶ Shortly afterward, however—though still well before the series had even aired—these defences changed to charges of historical inaccuracy, something which didn't seem to trouble Rai in the retransmission of the BBC *Robin Hood*, a series which hardly lays claims to verisimilitude. What is far more revealing, however, is that this second release inadvertently

¹⁴ *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Televisual Era*, ed. by Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (NY & London: Routledge, 2008), 125.

¹⁵ 'Rome Drama Draws in 6.6m Audience', *BBC*, 3 November 2005, section TV and Radio <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4402772.stm>> [accessed 6 July 2012]. 'BBC draws in record complaints', *Mail Online*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-178923/BBC-receives-record-complaints.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.gay.tv/news/entertainment/tropo-sesso-censura-rai-sul-colossal-tv-rome/>

revealed critics' frustration at the absence of a usable, nationally-oriented past. Speaking in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Rai drama executive Paola Masini commented that "Many Italian[s] just don't want to see **their history** depicted by Anglo-Saxons. Watching British actors playing Romans rubs a lot of people the wrong way..."¹⁷ Such a conception unwittingly reveals a perception among some quarters in Italy that Roman history is essentially Italian history *avant la lettre*, an association hitherto avoided in earlier cycles of epics and peplums thanks to its unsavoury associations with Mussolini (with *Scipio L'Africano*) and the Fascist republic of Salò. RAI's director of fiction, Massimo Ferrario, similarly claimed ownership of ancient Rome, (wrongly) dismissing the cast as "Made in USA" (there are in fact no American actors in any of the principal roles, and far more Italians than Americans anywhere in the production). In the same release, he also observed that "they knew from the outset that whoever was remaking Rome had a different concept of Ancient Rome to ours."¹⁸

If the problematic reception in Italy reveals anything about the past in the present, it is perhaps in its form as a cultural seismograph (to use Martin Winkler's term), revealing conflicting attitudes towards ownership of history and greater scepticism toward grand narratives of historical progress and nationalism. Comments made by Bruno Heller, the series creator, speak volumes about the conscious ways in which we both play with the past and repudiate any definitive claims to national identity through the past. Speaking in the "making of" featurette, Heller claimed that "generally speaking, Roman movies and TV shows take a kind of pastiche approach to the period. They jumble up all kinds of things from different periods and overlay a modern meaning on top."

To conclude: In presenting ancient Rome as an accidental history in which traditionally invisible actants and spaces are pushed to centre stage, *Rome* cannot be read unproblematically as an allegory of present concerns, and neither can it be read as a nationalist myth. Instead, it offers a pan-European past in which the Roman Empire is made up of all social classes and all national groups, so that the Aventine hill (the mob quarter) is as important as the Palatine hill (the seat of the Senate). This pan-Europeanism, however, is not a pro-European allegory of unity or solidarity, but rather a resistance to individual nationalism, a refusal to wave the flag of a particular country in favour of recognising the plurality of ancient Rome's people. *Rome* according to Heller, is thus not Italy in embryo, but is instead simply a jumbling up of all kinds of things with a modern narrative about Europe overlaid on top.

¹⁷ Quoted in Nick Vivarelli, 'Irritated Italos Give HBO's Rome the Thumbs Down', *Variety*, 26 March 2006 <www.variety.com/article/VR1117940324?refcatid=14> [accessed 28 June 2012].

¹⁸ "Sapevamo fin dall'inizio che chi stava realizzando Rome aveva un concetto dell'Antic Roma diverso dal nostro." <http://news.cinecitta.com/fiction/dettaglio.asp?id=160>, accessed 29th June 2012 (my translation).