

## Mobilising Pompeii for Italian Silent Cinema

The eruption of Vesuvius in 1906 killed two hundred and sixteen people, left thirty-four thousand homeless and caused substantial damage to local communities.<sup>1</sup> The cataclysm was reported globally and, for the first time, captured in moving images in all its destructive force.<sup>2</sup> One such actuality film juxtaposes footage of buildings destroyed and bodies lately crushed or asphyxiated with long panning shots of Pompeii borrowed from a travelogue that had been made in 1901 to entertain audiences in Britain with pleasant views of Italy.<sup>3</sup> It opens with the ancient city of the long-since dead. The camera takes in a gently smoking Vesuvius framed against the sky beneath which sheep graze unperturbed; high-angle shots survey the ruins; long and medium shots observe workers carrying baskets of debris past their

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<sup>1</sup> Chester et al. 2001.

<sup>2</sup> On films about Vesuvius and Pompeii, see Martinelli (1994: 35-62).

<sup>3</sup> A print entitled 'Pompeii and Vesuvius' survives in the Library of Congress currently without specific attribution, ID 50947. Martinelli (1994: 35) notes that Roberto Troncone courageously filmed the damage caused by the eruption and that parts of his film were then edited into the Cines documentary *La terribile eruzione del Vesuvio* and successfully distributed worldwide. Another Italian documentary was directed for the Turin production house Ambrosio by Giovanni Vitrotti, elements of which survive in the Cinémathèque Suisse. I am very grateful to Reto Kromer for providing me research access to his beautifully coloured restoration of the Vitrotti material, and to Bryony Dixon for enabling me to recognise the first part of the documentary as taken from the Warwick Trading Company's *Visit to Pompeii* (1901), available for viewing at <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-visit-to-pompeii-1901-online> [accessed 15 July 2019].

comfortably seated supervisors and well-dressed tourists who stare back at the camera seemingly without emotion. Then, abruptly, the location changes. Outside the Church of San Giuseppe, watched over by soldiers, multiple corpses lie covered in blankets; [tracking](#) shots expose homes engulfed by tephra and residents labouring to remove it; long shots display great geyser jets spewing from the volcano while vegetation still smoulders; a religious procession moves across the screen made up largely of women and children; finally, the camera returns to the slopes of Vesuvius but now ash and lava menacingly fill most of the frame.

Although this [hybrid](#) documentary [released in](#) 1906 testifies vividly to the evidentiary force of the new medium, nevertheless its representation of Italian archaeological, natural and social landscapes is highly coded and ideological.<sup>4</sup> The initial [panoramic shots](#) of Pompeii [borrowed from the travelogue](#) elaborate on an earlier pictorial tradition that had presented the site as a quiet pastoral tableau. In an idealised painting of 1865 by Edouard Sain, for example, two shirtless, vigorously labouring males are partially obscured at the bottom edge of the composition whilst attention is focussed instead on twelve barefoot and bare-armed young women attractively posed above them among the ruins. Although dressed in long peasant skirts, they move gracefully towards the viewer carrying baskets so light the girls appear to be dancing. Rising up behind, the volcano shelters rather than menaces them.<sup>5</sup> In turn, the film's [footage](#) of [contemporary](#) devastation challenges the visual conventions developed in the late eighteenth century to depict Vesuvius as a spectacle of the sublime. A nocturnal bird's eye view, a hellishly incandescent lava flow and a red-hot umbrella cloud of

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<sup>4</sup> For the constructedness of photographic reproduction and the intermediality of early cinema as evidenced by representations of Pompeii, see Bertellini (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Entitled *Fouilles à Pompéi* (The Excavations at Pompeii). See the catalogue entry by A. Sofroniew in Gardner Coates et al. (2012: 212 and plate 75).

ash, for example, dwarf the fearful individuals cowering in the corner of a canvas painted by Jacob More in 1780.<sup>6</sup> The modern moving images instead record daylight, Christian piety, and the ordinary (if considerable) effort of townspeople to recuperate their lives from the catastrophe. Spectators are invited to experience human sympathy not primal awe.

The documentary, therefore, adopts a provocatively teleological momentum that takes the viewer away from the stillness of the excavated city and the elegance of its visitors to witness the present-day havoc caused in the surrounding towns, the piled-up bodies, the suffering of the locals, and a destructive volcano whose flow Catholic devotion can scarcely stem. It appears to suggest that Pompeii is still a relatively picturesque classical site where the privileged tourist experiences aesthetic detachment from the labour of the excavations' workers or the suffering Vesuvius metes out to the neighbouring regions of the Italian South.

Despite this critique, four Italian fiction films about the last days of Pompeii were made between 1908 and 1926. The films are: *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1908, dir. L. Maggi, Ambrosio); *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1913, dir. E. Rodolfi, Ambrosio); *Ione, o Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1913, dir. G. Vidali, Pasquali); and *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1926, C. Gallone and A. Palermi, UCI).<sup>7</sup> This article explores those fiction films and argues that they work to mobilise Pompeii both for contemporary Italians and for cinema. The films do so by taking advantage of Pompeii's nodal position in a dense cultural network of classical receptions that reached far beyond Italy and by deploying silent cinema's capacity for

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<sup>6</sup> Entitled *Mount Vesuvius in Eruption*. See the catalogue entry by Gardner Coates in Gardner Coates et al. (2012: 126 and plate 19).

<sup>7</sup> The first and only fiction film about the last days of Pompeii made prior to these was produced in 1900. Directed by William Booth, it reconstructed the eruption through cinematic special effects. Hereafter, for convenience, I shall refer to the four later films by date and director or studio.

intermediality that could simultaneously accommodate and challenge the classical receptions of traditional media. The outcome is that the fiction films situate viewers immersively on Italian soil, within the reconstructed city, and substitute for a detached tourist gaze an impassioned, participatory one.

### *Reimagining Pompeii*

All four Italian fiction films draw for their plotline on the historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* published in 1834 by the English aristocrat Edward Bulwer-Lytton, since his Romantic tale of love between Glaucus and Ione (fictional Greek characters who live in the doomed city, escape the eruption of 79 AD, and subsequently convert to Christianity in Athens) had become the dominant account of Pompeii's demise by the early twentieth century. The sensational rediscovery of the city in the mid-eighteenth century stimulated the rapid development of a dense and interwoven network of cultural responses to this exceptional remnant of classical history and cruel nature. That network, however, was predictably dominated by foreign responses – especially that authored by Bulwer-Lytton.

At first the site had been guarded possessively as a mine filled with treasures for royals. Its artworks were quarried by slave labour in order that they might grace the private collection of antiquities of the Spanish kings of Naples. From the period of French occupation onward, the museum and the (still unsystematic) excavations were opened up to wealthy travellers and mapped onto their Grand Tours. Documented, visited and widely reported, Pompeii now seemed to provide a portal into a past that was not so much picturesque as curious, museal, everyday and heart-rending. The revelation of ruined urban spaces, broken artefacts and contorted skeletons stimulated re-imaginings in visual, literary and performance arts of a lost civilisation, its city, people and their last days.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Blix (2009: 9-27 and 48-88); Moormann (2015: 7-194); Seydl (2012: 15-31).

Bulwer-Lytton composed his celebrated account mainly in Naples, after seeing on route through Milan a massive, apocalyptic canvas by the Russian painter Karl Briullov that depicted twenty-seven figures struggling to escape the volcanic catastrophe, and after his autopsy of the excavations guided by the English geologist Sir William Gell.<sup>9</sup> The opening words of the novel's original preface testify both to the writer's desire to resurrect Pompeii and to his outsider's perspective:

On visiting those disinterred remains of an ancient city which, more perhaps than either the delicious breeze or the cloudless sun, the violet valleys and orange-groves of the South, attract the traveller to the neighbourhood of Naples; on viewing, still fresh and vivid, the houses, the streets, the temples, the theatres of a place existing in the haughtiest age of the Roman Empire, – it was not unnatural, perhaps, that a writer who had before laboured, however unworthily, in the art to revive and to create, should feel a keen desire to people once more those deserted streets, to repair those graceful ruins, to reanimate the bones which were yet spared to his survey, to traverse the gulf of eighteen centuries, and to wake to a second existence the City of the Dead!<sup>10</sup>

Pompeii was evoked in many nations and diverse media<sup>11</sup> but it was Bulwer-Lytton's Victorian narrative that achieved the widest dissemination and the most profound influence

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<sup>9</sup> On Bulwer-Lytton's novel and its commercial success, see Harrison (2011); Goldhill (2011: 194-202); St Clair and Bautz (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Both Bulwer-Lytton's original preface of 1834 and his text (prepared by George P. Landow) are conveniently accessible at [www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org). Following convention, citations from the novel here will be by book and chapter number.

<sup>11</sup> For a wide range of examples see Moormann (2015: 165-424).

through the global publication of many illustrated editions and translations (including Italian ones). Throughout Europe and the United States, it was swiftly reproduced in neo-classical paintings and sculptures and adapted for performances of assorted kinds (plays, pyrodramas, songs, operas, ballets, pantomimes and circus acts). Having originally been created out of the archaeological finds, its English fictions were even imported back into Pompeii to become points of reference for visitors exploring the disinterred city.

The four Italian film adaptations of the novel were made across a period of rapid technological, cultural and economic development for silent cinema. The 1908 film directed by Maggi is widely recognised as a foundational work for the emergent genre of the *kolossal*, or epic of antiquity, that became a vehicle to raise the cultural status of cinema, to reach respectable audiences at home and to obtain extensive profit abroad.<sup>12</sup> The 1908 adaptation is characterised by a whole reel in length, literary plotting, crisp photography, pictorial referencing, operatic gestures, worldwide distribution and high praise on exhibition. In the ‘golden age’ of the genre in Italy, the two rival features of 1913 are differentiated by an original score, a soprano voice, dialogic intertitles, a refined and spatially complex scenography, and choreographed crowds (Rodolfi’s), and naturalistic acting, elaborate location shooting and articulated sequences (Vidali’s). In contrast, the 1926 remake by Gallone and Palermi was criticised on release as an outmoded repeat of Italy’s historical genre in the face of American and German innovations in filmmaking. Although the film opens with extended panoramic views over the excavations in their current state in the 1920s, and later tracks back to reveal the fantastical proportions of the futuristic Art Deco palace that belongs to Arbaces (Bulwer-Lytton’s chief priest of Isis), its camerawork is otherwise largely static and its plotline by now all too familiar. The adaptation from 1926 is now commonly

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<sup>12</sup> On the Italian genre, see conveniently Muscio (2013).

understood as an unsuccessful attempt to repeat the Italian film industry's past splendours at a time of technical stagnation and financial collapse.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in order to find aesthetic legitimation and reach international markets, and with varied degrees of success, Italian silent cinema mobilised Bulwer-Lytton's Pompeii as an entry point into the global network of cultural responses to the city's destruction.<sup>14</sup> But, I would argue, it also used Pompeii to assert its own distinctive authority in that network – to claim for itself the status of an art form that was particularly affective, democratising, and nationalist.

### *The nation*

The four fiction films exploit the medium's origins in sequential photography and its evolving techniques for visual transition through editing not only to propel their retelling of Bulwer-Lytton's story but also to challenge its external viewpoint and Anglican sentiment. The medium of photography had already played a significant part in the nationalisation of Pompeii's archaeological recovery as well as the display of Vesuvius's eruptions. A drive to nationalise Pompeii and the process of its excavation had begun immediately on the unification of Italy with the work of Giuseppe Fiorelli - site director from 1860 to 1875.<sup>15</sup> He abolished the requirement of a personal permit for visitors to enter the site, and began systematically to exhume blocks of houses, ordinary life and its dying gestures. Fiorelli developed a technique to reconstruct the bodies of victims by filling in the cavities the putrefaction of their flesh had created and then removing the volcanic debris from around the

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<sup>13</sup> For sustained discussion of the films in relation to each other, see Redi (1994); Wyke (1997: 147-82); Marlow-Mann (2006); Aubert (2009: 115-36).

<sup>14</sup> As Marlow-Mann (2006: 67-8).

<sup>15</sup> Moorman (2015: 74-83).

hardened plaster. The resultant indexical moulds were photographed for the archaeological record and for souvenirs to be sold across the world. These photographs established a new, disturbing imagery for Pompeii that reclaimed the classical site for Italians by giving visceral shape to the suffering of their ancestors.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1913 film directed by Rodolfi, immediately after its title and before the novel's characters are introduced, a brief sequence displays the symbolic figure of Time — an elderly and bearded male, seated high on a wall, overlooking the ruins much like the supervisors exhibited in archaeological photography. Once Time turns over his hourglass, spectators are taken back to a fully reconstructed street of 79 AD, the *via Domitia*.<sup>17</sup> The sequence corresponds to the preface of the novel where, outside the past time of the narrative and from the perspective of a traveller, the author articulates his desire 'to people once more those deserted streets'. As an embodiment of Italian archaeology rather than English literature, however, Time anchors film spectators in the actual location of his revived Pompeii rather than bringing that Pompeii to the traveller-reader at home in another country.

The film directed by Gallone and Palermi and released in 1926 also contains an initial, extra-temporal sequence that competes with the novel's preface and draws on the Italian archaeological record.<sup>18</sup> It opens like a documentary, with high-angled panoramas displaying the ruined streets followed by shots of canonical locations that will be re-envisioned in the film (such as the *via dell'Abbondanza*, the temples of Jupiter and Isis, the forum, the baths and the amphitheatre). But, then, a rapid montage in a repeated triadic pattern shows first the current condition of a key structure, second its recreation 'as it was

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<sup>16</sup> On the plaster casts and Pompeian photography, see Pucci (2012: 76-8); Gardner Coates (2012: 44 and 47-9).

<sup>17</sup> On this sequence, which survives in only one print, see Dagna and Giori (2015: 37-8).

<sup>18</sup> As Marlow-Mann (2000: 71-4). Cf. Parigi (1994: 67-84).



nineteen centuries ago', and third its hectic use by citizens of antiquity. Such a tricolon pattern is also discernible among the hundreds of photographs that recorded the excavations along the *via dell'Abbondanza* directed by Vittorio Spinazzola between 1910 and 1923: first the disarray of architecture or artefact at the moment of discovery, second the process of reconstruction and conservation whose labour is emphasised through the presence of busy workers and vigilant supervisors, third the feature fully restored or *repristinato*. This third, climactic group of photographs sanitises the site as manicured and empty, thus prioritising science over art.<sup>19</sup> The opening of both the 1926 and the 1913 films thus proclaims the authority of cinema as a quasi-scientific mode of recovery but also as an improvement on the Italian archaeological project. For both are about to step beyond the boundaries of dispassionate science to reconstruct an ancient Pompeii that is full of people, movement, colour, and music and to invite their spectators into that reconstructed city to experience the emotions of its occupants.

Toward their close, all four adaptations to screen of Bulwer-Lytton's novel offer up the red-tinted spectacle of Pompeii's destruction by Vesuvius. Reviews at home and abroad praised the two versions released competitively in 1913, in particular, for their exploitation of authentic locations and insertion of actuality footage of the 1906 eruption. Of the Rodolfi version, an advance review in *The Times* commented admiringly: 'The film ...has been made in Italy, the more important scenes having been enacted by the performers under the shadow of Vesuvius. The pictures have, in consequence, a brilliance of lighting and an accuracy of definition which would probably have been unattainable in our own latitudes' (September 24, 1913).<sup>20</sup> And earlier, on its release in Italy, the Roman daily *Il giornale d'Italia* remarked:

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<sup>19</sup> The pattern of tricolons is most obvious in the posthumous publication of Spinazzola's work, see Hartnett (2011: 246-69).

<sup>20</sup> Cited in I. Christie (2013: 119-20).

‘The city’s catastrophe is reproduced with a Michelangesque terror. There are some actuality shots from the recent eruptions: so here are the rivers of lava that destroy everything they meet.’<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the 1906 *film dal vero* described above, which invites its viewers to feel present catastrophe more keenly than past, the two fiction films of 1913 place the present at the service of the past, in order to render the latter more realistically horrifying (Fig. 1). As a consequence both Pompeii and Vesuvius are re-indigenised as integral features of the southern Italian landscape: Pompeii as the nation’s troubling heritage, Vesuvius as its natural tragedy then as now.

A strong streak of providentialism runs right through the nineteenth-century novel, in which the eruption functions as an act of God.<sup>22</sup> The city is depicted as a microcosm of the decadence of empire: ‘In its minute but glittering shops, its tiny palaces, its baths, its forum, its theatre, its circus – in the energy yet corruption, in the refinement yet the vice, of its people, you beheld a model of the whole empire’ (I.3). Bulwer-Lytton’s Pompeii is rotten and its Roman elite cruel, avaricious and effete. When Vesuvius erupts, the event is explicitly pronounced a divine punishment by the leader of the Christian community: on sighting an advancing cloud of ash and pumice stone, he proclaims with relish ‘This is the hand of God – God be praised.’ (IV.5). Yet that Christian community does not escape, burdened perhaps by its resonance with a nineteenth-century Protestant perception of Roman Catholicism as too extreme and intolerant. In the English author’s hierarchies of nation, race and religion, the survivors from the corrupt city are the noble Greek couple Glaucus and Ione who convert in gratitude to a form of Christianity reminiscent of moderate Anglicanism. This form of North European moralism could scarcely appeal to Italian spectators who had so recently seen

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Martinelli (1994: 315). The translation is mine.

<sup>22</sup> On the novel’s providentialism, see Goldhill (2011: 195-9) and St Clair and Bautz (2012: 52-5).

distressing images of the Catholic South praying fervently for deliverance from the chaos of the 1906 disaster. Hence providentialism is largely excised from three of the film adaptations, which suppress Roman debauchery, the Greek identity of Glaucus and his beloved, and the (historically unattested) presence of Christians at Pompeii. Only the last adaptation from 1926 contains sustained sequences of Christian worship, Greek nobility and Roman debauchery. Its opening intertitle introduces Pompeii as ‘imperial Rome’s city of delight’ and as both ‘a wonder and a warning of humanity’s fluctuating fortunes’. Remaining far more faithful to the novel, the film directed by Gallone and Palermi was also correspondingly far less successful commercially.<sup>23</sup> Its representation of the nation’s heritage was further compromised, in the view of one indignant fascist critic, because the necessity of finding co-funding abroad had obliged the production’s employment of German and Austrian actors in some of the lead roles.<sup>24</sup>

Italian film production began in 1905 with *La presa di Roma* - a scene of the recent origins of the nation when the Italian army had captured Rome from the Papal States on 20 September 1870. Italian cinema then found in the Roman past and the epic genre an ideal

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<sup>23</sup> On differences such as these between the Italian films and the English novel, see also Aubert (2009: 115-36) and Stähli (2012: 81-2).

<sup>24</sup> The review in the fascist literary journal *L'impero* (13 February 1926) is cited in Martinelli (1981: 287). While this article is concerned with some common strategies for mobilising Pompeii that occur across the four Italian fiction films, it is also possible to find elements of ideological difference related to their disparate times of production. See n. 13 above, for consideration of how, for example, the films of 1913 touch upon Italy’s colonial project or how, after the establishment of Mussolini’s dictatorship, the publicity for the 1926 film deploys a decisively fascist tone difficult to achieve within a plotline that so closely follows Bulwer-Lytton’s novel.

space in which to construct a long-standing, shared and prestigious identity for its mass audience. A nation still so newly-formed and so fractured into regions might be better bound together through cinema's invitation to enter that space.<sup>25</sup> In the fiction films here under scrutiny, then, the representation of Pompeii's last days is shaped to celebrate the grandeur of Italy's classical past and to testify spectacularly to the damage nature can sadly cause to the *bel paese*. Pompeii is mobilised for Italy, but it is also mobilised for Italian cinema as the films, through their photographic realism and location shooting, also celebrate the technical capacity of the Italian film industry to animate past tragedy and Roman history authentically. As early as 1908, a writer for one of the first specialist publications on Italian cinema boasted on seeing Maggi's film:

Only someone, like us Neapolitans, who has witnessed an eruption of Vesuvius and was in Naples three years ago, can have a precise and exact idea of what is that appalling phenomenon and can therefore calculate what and how many technical difficulties one must combat to reach such perfection in the reproduction of that spectacle... This fact alone would be enough to put our Italian film production in the front ranks... We have therefore been able to demonstrate that Italy, when she wants, knows how to hold her own and is not outdone by other nations. (*Il Cafè-Chantant e la Rivista Fono-Cinematografica* December 10, 1908).<sup>26</sup>

Here Pompeii and Vesuvius are caught up in a tightly-knitted rhetoric of cultural heritage, experiential knowledge, technical bravura and nationhood.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> As Canosa (1997-8) and Wyke (1997, *passim*).

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Bernardini and Martinelli (1996: 207). The translation is mine.

<sup>27</sup> On the rhetoric of the review, see Garofalo (2012: 376).

*Forms of femininity*

Despite silent cinema's origins in the modern and realist technology of sequential photography, it was strongly inter-medial, adopting from earlier representational forms both the narrative and the iconography of its reconstructed classical worlds. In the production, publicity and reviews of the Italian historical genre to which these Pompeian fiction films belong, emphasis is repeatedly placed on the authenticity of their photography, but also on the coherence of their literary plotting, the melodrama of their choreographed gestures, the spectacle of their crowd scenes and the triumph of their *mise en scène*.<sup>28</sup> On August 27 1913, the day after the opening in the capital's opera house Teatro delle Quattro Fontane of the feature directed by Vidali, a journalist for the daily newspaper *Il giornale d'Italia* raved:

We left the grand and elegant Roman assembly suffused with amazement and wonder. Amazement for the original and unusual means by which this magnificent historical film was staged, for the supremely skilful way in which Bulwer-Lytton's masterpiece was understood and played. Wonder for the number of sensations we felt which are not easy to analyse, for the intense pathos that radiates from the whole work. In front of scenes like that of the circus or the eruption of Vesuvius emotion becomes genuinely tragic, emotion such as no theatre using its traditional means has ever been able to communicate to a packed audience.<sup>29</sup>

While the external scenes of the four film adaptations of the novel invoke archaeological and volcanological photography, their domestic interiors often cite nineteenth-

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<sup>28</sup> As Marlow-Mann (2000: 67-8). Cf. Rhodes (2000: esp. 310-15).

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Martinelli (1994: 296). The translation is my own.

century paintings, especially the early, sensual Pompeian works of Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Applying his Dutch and Flemish expertise to the French neo-classical style of history painting, and consulting a huge personal library of photographs concerning the excavations themselves, Alma-Tadema had composed a distinctive series of scenes of the small-town life of leisure of the Pompeian elite in his London studios starting in the mid-1860s. Widely distributed and popularised as reproductive prints, these canvases were greatly admired for the precise detail of the luxurious surroundings, objects and textures that his exquisite Pompeians enjoyed.<sup>30</sup> Decades later, the Italian films replicate the style of Alma-Tadema in their set design, introducing pictorial framing, deep staging, vanishing-point perspectives, and specific iconographic quotation.<sup>31</sup> In the films, reproduction of his art-historical antiquarianism is most densely clustered around the figure of the aristocratic beloved Ione. She is the main carrier of their aspiration to the status of a modern visual art, not least because in the novel she intensifies the sight of anyone who gazes upon her: ‘The wealth of her graces was inexhaustible – she beautified the commonest action; a word, a look from her, seemed magic. Love her, and you entered into a new world, you passed from this trite and commonplace earth. You were in a land in which your eyes saw everything through an enchanted medium.’ (II.4)

An advertising card for the 1908 film captures – and renders motionless as a painting – the moment when Nydia, a blind flower-seller whom Glaucus has rescued from her cruel masters, enters Ione’s garden (Fig. 2). The postcard focuses attention on how the film frame has been broken up into three planes of action: the foreground where Ione adorns herself; the mid-ground separated by a row of columns behind which Nydia walks laterally; and the

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<sup>30</sup> On Alma-Tadema’s Pompeian paintings, see Barrow (2001: esp. 28-41); Prettejohn and Trippi (2016).

<sup>31</sup> I. Blom (2016).

background where Glaucus on arrival waves a greeting before a painted woodland. The three-dimensional decoration of Ione's garden evokes works such as Alma-Tadema's *In the Peristyle* (1866), through its spatial composition that is far more elaborate than usual for a film of the 1900s, and through its flowing fountain, curved bench, classical statuary, hanging garlands, draped leopard skins and scattered doves.<sup>32</sup> Reviews were suitably appreciative: 'The scene in the house of Ione reaches the most pure and perfectly artistic level imaginable – a true celebration of ornament and style' (*La Cine-Fono*, December 4, 1906).<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, when Rodolfi's film of 1913 exhibits Ione at her bath, it directly quotes Alma-Tadema's *The Frigidarium* (1890), including the act of undressing, a glimpse in depth of partially nude bathers, and the closure of a curtain that teasingly censors the scene (although the film, unlike the painting, disrobes its characters only as far as their shoulders).<sup>34</sup> The 1926 film, however, also locates a feverish clustering of art-historical citations of both Alma-Tadema and his Italian followers in an early salacious sequence in a Pompeian bathhouse.<sup>35</sup> The opening long shot of a much larger group of women (who are now semi-nude rather than merely bare-shouldered as in the more demure 1913 film) cites works like that of Domenico Morelli, *Il bagno pompeiano* (1861). As the camera alternates between distant, middle and close shots that flaunt breasts and buttocks, so other paintings are evoked whose classicised female nudity had been brought closer to the eye of the voyeuristic viewer, such as Alma-Tadema's *The Frigidarium* (1890), *An Apodyterium* (1886) and *In the Tepidarium* (1881) – in the latter of which the painter's most erotic nude reclines in

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<sup>32</sup> Bertani (2014: 327-30). Cf. Marlow-Mann (2000: 70).

<sup>33</sup> Cited and translated in Rhodes (2000: 311).

<sup>34</sup> Blom (2016: 190-3); Marlow-Mann (2000: 74-5).

<sup>35</sup> For discussion of this deliberately titillating scene, see Aubert (2009: 133-4).

languorous exhaustion.<sup>36</sup> Such pictorial referencing through Ione and other Pompeian women works to satisfy the expectations of middle-class spectators (because it replicates a familiar iconography for Pompeii), to assert the artistic ambition of Italian silent film and, in the case of the final film, to justify nudity and evade censorship. In mid-1920s Italy the strategy of titillation failed, as the censors intervened to cut out elements of the bathhouse scene.<sup>37</sup>

Yet the evocation of nineteenth-century Pompeian paintings puts on display, at the same time, a pointed divergence of social class between their visual art and Italian silent cinema. Alma-Tadema rarely tackled the degradation and misery of ancient slavery in his works. Unusually, in *The Exedra* (1871), the viewer's attention is drawn to the left side of the composition where a slave sits slumped alone on the pavement wearing a crude garment that bears his number and his owner's name. Shaven-headed, barefooted, and despondent, he awaits instructions from a group of oblivious patricians who are napping, conversing or admiring the view.<sup>38</sup> In *Glaucus and Nydia* (1867), which illustrates a chapter from Bulwer-Lytton's novel, the painter seats the adoring blind girl below and before a divan on which her master wistfully reclines. Although this is not a depiction of joyous lovers, Nydia fits aesthetically into the agreeable scene (unlike the slave in *The Exedra*) with her exotic headdress, flowing locks, complexly draped dress and cloak, jewellery, and brightly coloured garland she is weaving.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, in the 1908 film directed by Maggi, Nydia intrudes upon the artistic prettiness of Ione's garden. The camera shifts attention away from Ione

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<sup>36</sup> On the painting, see Barrow (2001: 98) and Prettejohn (2016: 69-70).

<sup>37</sup> As noted by Martinelli (1994: 47). [The version of the film restored by Cineteca nazionale \(Rome\) was completed using prints sourced from multiple foreign archives.](#)

<sup>38</sup> Barrow (2001: 34); Seydl (2012: 22 and 102-3).

<sup>39</sup> Seydl (2012: 202-3).



elegantly at her toilette on to Nydia, who stumbles awkwardly across the screen and gestures in torment at Glaucus' declarations of love for the mistress of the house.

The Italian films differ radically from both the artworks and the novel in the kind of femininity they make a key concern. The slave girl does gain significant interiority in Bulwer-Lytton's narrative. Thus the chapter to which Alma-Tadema's painting most closely corresponds (II, 5) ends with Nydia addressing the door of Glaucus's house through which she must depart to take a message of love to Ione: 'Three happy days – days of unspeakable delight, have I known since I passed thee — blessed threshold! May peace dwell ever with thee when I am gone! And now, my heart tears itself from thee, and the only sound it utters bids me – die!'. However it is the love felt by Glaucus and his metaphoric slavery to imperial Rome on which the narrative converges for its closure. Described near the beginning as 'born in Athens, the subject of Rome' (I, 3), Glaucus declares in an epistolary epilogue that at last he can endure 'the crushing weight of the Roman yoke' (V, 14) because he possesses a love enriched by a shared Christian faith. In contrast, in all the Italian films, Nydia is the (or a major) protagonist – visibly enslaved, disabled, tormented by a love Glaucus does not return, and peripheral to the elite life of leisure that most often takes centre stage in nineteenth-century depictions of Pompeii.

A focus on Nydia and contrast with the exquisiteness embodied by Ione are sustained in a variety of ways across the fiction films. For example, the 1908 version opens with a sequence of emblematic shots introducing its small selection of characters from the novel. Each poses in turn before a plain backcloth. Holding her walking stick in one hand and a simple bunch of flowers in the other 'Nydia the blind girl' is given priority,<sup>40</sup> while Ione 'the fiancée of Glaucus' is introduced later toying with her pearl necklace. Alma-Tadema was much admired for the sensorial quality of his paintings, evidenced in his many images of

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<sup>40</sup> Nydia's priority is noted by Aubert (2009: 122).

privileged women delicately smelling the scent of gorgeously textured bouquets.<sup>41</sup> In the films, however, Nydia the unseeing flower-seller is the main vehicle for providing audiences with access to the sensorial – touch and hearing are vital means for her to find her way around the city. She too smells the scent of her flowers in Rodolfi’s film of 1913, but the squalid setting of her pitiful, fleeting gesture in the backroom of a tavern, her sombre costume, and the utter dishevelment of both her flowers and herself offers a strong contrast to the painter’s beautifully composed scenes (Fig. 3). In the Vidali film of 1913 and Gallone and Palermi’s of 1926, Ione is the more important of the female protagonists. Yet Nydia still figures in an extended series of strongly articulated, alternating (or ‘cross-cut’) scenes of suspense: manipulating her captors in the palace of Arbaces, High Priest of Isis; finding there the imprisoned Ione; orchestrating the rescue of Glaucus who has been condemned to the lions in the arena; leading the lovers through the collapsing city to the shore. The films also manifest little interest in rounding off the socially matched romance of Glaucus and Ione (the climactic concern of Bulwer-Lytton’s novel), preferring mainly to come to an end when Nydia throws herself despairingly into the sea.<sup>42</sup> In the final moments of Maggi’s and Rodolfi’s film versions, the tragic pathos of her suicide is also heightened by the quotation of Millais’ Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia* (1851-2) – at last, framed in death by floating flowers, Nydia has appropriated for herself Ione’s pictorial qualities.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Sijnesael (2016).

<sup>42</sup> The print of the Vidali film that survives in the British National Film Archive ends with the intertitle ‘Ten years afterwards. In memory revered’. That suggests the original may have contained a final shot of Glaucus and Ione in Athens at the tomb they have built as a memorial to Nydia. The other surviving prints I have seen all end with Nydia’s suicide.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Marlow-Mann (2000: 74) and Bertani (2014: 328).

This cinematic attentiveness to Nydia's unreciprocated love for her new master does not borrow from North European sources (as do the plotline and iconography) but from the Italian tradition of opera lirica – specifically Errico Petrella's *Jone, o l'ultimo giorno di Pompei*, an opera in four acts first staged at Milan's La Scala in 1858. The work, whose libretto had condensed the English novel into a series of melodramatic motifs featuring the unrequited and interlocked loves of Nydia for Glaucus and Arbaces for Ione, had achieved global repertory success by the early twentieth century. Some of the opera's motifs were included in the orchestral accompaniment to screenings of Vidali's film in Rome in 1913, screenings that for such prestigious feature films often took place in the city's opera houses such as the Teatro delle Quattro Fontane.<sup>44</sup>

Released in the same year, Rodolfi's film ambitiously situated itself beyond even that operatic tradition in which Ione and Nydia were musical rivals. Its production house Ambrosio commissioned an original score from the composer Carlo Graziani-Walter to be synchronised with their print on exhibition. The voices of a choir and a single soprano were also intermittently matched to the action projected on screen, the soprano singing not as Ione but as Nydia. In three solos, she further accentuated the hope and despair to which the actress playing Nydia could be seen giving pantomimic expression. The first solo proclaims a love both joyous and jealous as the blind girl is framed on screen front right listening in to the amorous whisperings of the sun-drenched lovers seated back left (the score here poignantly indicates that 'Nydia is breaking inside'). The second solo is a prayer to Isis to give her heart relief from her fatal love, and the third is a farewell to her beloved Glaucus before she throws

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<sup>44</sup> On the relationship of Petrella's opera to the novel, see Bertani (2014: 316-7) and Moormann (2015: 367-8). On the relationship between the films and opera lirica, see esp. Russo (2014).

herself into the sea to put an end to her suffering.<sup>45</sup> Although Alma-Tadema had placed musicians in many of his Pompeian paintings and Bulwer-Lytton had characterised his blind flower-seller as gifted with a sweet voice, the sounds of descriptive instrumental music, a choir and a soprano are aspects of the cinematic reimagining of Pompeii not available to viewers of paintings or readers of novels. The Turinese magazine *La vita cinematografica* reported its amazement at how the musical performance of Rodolfi's film stirred in its spectators a vivid impression that the distressed young girl on screen was singing.<sup>46</sup>

Already, on the publication of Bulwer-Lytton's tale of star-crossed love between the aristocrats Glaucus and Ione, a counter focus on Nydia had soon emerged as symbol of disadvantage combined with courage and dignity. Before the abolition of slavery in the United States, a stage adaptation of 1835 had been designed by the playwright Louisa Medina for her audience of lower-Manhattan workers as a study in the industrial exploitation of skilled labour,<sup>47</sup> while some twenty years later a sculpture in marble designed by Randolph Rogers (which was put on display in multiple versions in many American museums and became wildly popular) depicted the flower-seller, bent low to the ground, her left hand to her right ear, controlling her imbalanced pose as she runs heroically and alone through the wreckage of the city.<sup>48</sup> The Italian painter Federico Maldarelli focussed the viewer's gaze on the blind slave when illustrating a chapter from Bulwer-Lytton's novel, *Jone e Nidia* (1864). Yet the chapter to which his scene corresponds concludes with Ione musing over the contents of the love letter that the slave has just delivered (II, 6). And while Alma-Tadema's

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<sup>45</sup> On the surviving score and its experiential implications for spectators, see Dagna and Giori (2015).

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Dagna and Giori (2015: 47).

<sup>47</sup> Seydl (2012: 21-2).

<sup>48</sup> Seydl (2012: 24).

illustration of an earlier chapter places Nydia at the feet and in the service of Glaucus, Maldarelli's stands her centre frame, dressed in a dark costume that contrasts markedly with the bright colours which grace the seated Ione, manifesting her disability as she tenderly feels the face of the mistress whose beauty she cannot see. The painting belongs to a tradition of strong political commitment in nineteenth-century Italian neo-classicism, where Rome's slaves could embody the condition of Italian subjection under foreign rule and later, after unification, the condition of poverty persisting among the southern peasantry.<sup>49</sup> The narrative, visual and aural focus on Nydia in Italian silent cinema gives to the Pompeii of the past the capacity to play out the suffering of poor southerners that the 1906 documentary had found only in the surrounding communities of the present. And epic cinema's invitation to its spectators to take up Nydia's standpoint thus engages them collectively with her experience of Pompeii as a site of bitter suffering for the underprivileged.

The forms of masculinity in other Italian epic films of the period provide a further explanatory match for the forms of femininity to be found in these Pompeii films - their populist appeal. The humble millworker Ursus (played by the strongman or *forzuto* Bruto Castellani) comes to the aid of the aristocratic soldier Vinicius in his attempts to free his beloved from the depredations of emperor Nero in *Quo vadis?* (1913). The bodybuilder Mario Guaita (aka Ausonia) battles his opponents, climbs down ropes and bends iron bars as the protagonist of *Spartaco* (1913). The slave Maciste (played by the dockworker Bartolomeo Pagano) takes a more active, muscular role than his master, a Roman general, in protecting and rescuing a girl kidnapped by the cruel Carthaginians in *Cabiria* (1914), and then becomes the lead character in a whole series of action and adventure films set in the present.<sup>50</sup> The flower-seller Nydia shows noble Glaucus and Ione a way out of the burning city of Pompeii.

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<sup>49</sup> See Figurelli (2011).

<sup>50</sup> For the strongmen of early Italian cinema, see Blom 2018.

Silent cinema was a modern mass medium and through the strongmen and the slave girls of the *kolossal*, Italian spectators who had no classical education, or were even illiterate, could find an exciting way into Roman history.<sup>51</sup>

*The medium of cinema: emotionality*

Cinema was a self-referential medium from the start, and two of the fiction films draw particular attention to the process of their own construction and appreciation at moments when the Egyptian priest Arbaces exercises the magical power of moving image projection. A number of Pompeian works by Alma-Tadema, in an equally self-reflexive mode, had taken as their subject the connoisseurship of visual art. In *Antistius Labeon AD 75* (1874), the Victorian artist portrayed himself as an ancient miniaturist observing the reactions of a group carefully studying his most recent work which rests on his studio easel. This, and works like *A Roman Lover of Art* (1868) where a wealthy art collector presents privately to his guests the small polychrome sculpture he has acquired, invites the contemporary viewer in turn to admiration and purchase of the paintings in which such scenes of connoisseurship appear.<sup>52</sup> In Rodolfi's film of 1913, the priest in his temple conjures up for a spellbound Ione moving images of her deepest fears – Glaucus cavorting in the arms of courtesans (Fig. 4). His magic is achieved through the heightened cinematic effect of splitting the screen. In the 1926 film directed by Gallone and Palermi, Arbaces shows to a horrified Ione the future he desires with her by projecting moving images of it onto his palace wall through the technique of superimposition (Fig. 5). In both these scenes, Ione is figured as a shocked spectator, Arbaces

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<sup>51</sup> I am grateful to one of the readers for the journal, for drawing my attention to this useful comparison.

<sup>52</sup> See esp. Barrow (2001: 37-40 and 79-80).

as a demonic filmmaker.<sup>53</sup> The priest's association with filmmaking is supported by the multiple conceptual connections that had been made from the start of the twentieth century between silent cinema and ancient Egypt: cinema was a blackened enclosure like a tomb; a mysterious necropolis; a silent world that revealed word-images; a phantom preservation of life.<sup>54</sup> If, however, Arbaces can symbolise the filmmaker, then the vision of antiquity Italian film offers its spectators is in turn figured as far more subjective and more disturbing than the tranquil scenes of Pompeian painting (and closer in kind to the seductive phantasmagorias the jealous priest is scornfully described as stage-managing in the novel).<sup>55</sup>

In his essay of 1896 'The Aetiology of Hysteria', Freud had started to describe psychoanalytic treatment in terms of an excavation: like an archaeologist, the psychoanalyst is able to exhume the deeply buried origins of a patient's illness. His discussions about resurrecting the unconscious memories of female hysterics evoked the specifically Pompeian motif of bringing the dead back to life. The engagement of Pompeii with psychoanalysis became more pronounced after 1907, when Freud published *Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen's Gradiva*, an analysis of a novella in which an archaeologist becomes obsessed with an ancient bas-relief, dreams he sees the young woman displayed on it dying in the eruption of 79 AD and visits the ruins in the hope that he may yet encounter her ghost.<sup>56</sup>

Archaeological metaphor also drives some of the earliest theories of cinema, as when the American poet Vachel Lindsay in *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915, 254-5) describes the

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<sup>53</sup> Significantly Arbaces is played in the 1908 film by its director Maggi and in one of the 1913 films by its director Vidali.

<sup>54</sup> For the connections, see Lant (1992: 87-112).

<sup>55</sup> On the theatrical manipulations of Arbaces in the novel, see Easson (2004: 109-12); Goldhill (2011: 197-8).

<sup>56</sup> See e.g. Orrells (2011).

cinema auditorium as an Egyptian tomb we enter with a torch and suggests that we should revere the unconscious memories of the deep past stirred within us when we look upon the modern form of hieroglyphs.<sup>57</sup> Psychoanalysis had not yet emerged as an established mode of film theory in the 1910s, but in Italy clinical psychologists, psychiatrists and neurologists were beginning to voice concerns about the strong and potentially adverse effects of the modern medium on the minds of the vulnerable: ‘It is certain that among all of today’s inventions, cinematography takes the cake for having the most profound and intense impact on the psychic life.... After reality, the cinematograph remains the most faithful and effective source of emotions.’<sup>58</sup> It is within this discursive network of psychic disturbance, classical archaeology and cinema that the self-reflexive sequences in the Italian fiction films about Pompeii seem to operate. They invite spectators to appreciate cinema’s Pompeii not just aesthetically or scientifically (as had the visitors to the ruins in the 1906 documentary), but emotionally – to fear, like Ione, the phantoms their reconstructions disinter.

*The medium of cinema: the masses*

Alma-Tadema may have chosen to paint agreeable scenes of wealthy Pompeians at play because they were suitable for purchase by wealthy private buyers to decorate their drawing rooms.<sup>59</sup> Bulwer-Lytton wrote his novel about the city’s last days with his fellow English gentlemen and their ladies in mind as readers (at least for initial publication)<sup>60</sup> and with

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<sup>57</sup> As discussed by Lant (1992: 107-8).

<sup>58</sup> Mario Umberto Masini and Giuseppe Vidoni, ‘The cinematograph in the field of mental illness and criminality: Notes’, *Archivio di antropologia criminale, psichiatria e medicina legale*, 26 (1915), pp. 5-6, cited and translated in Casetti et al. (2017: 290).

<sup>59</sup> Barrow (2001: 32).

<sup>60</sup> St Clair and Bautz (2012: 55-6).



manifest disdain for the Pompeian ‘mob’ which, at the novel’s climax, he labels savage, thirsty for blood, superstitious, forgetful of authority, ‘wholly ignorant, half free and half servile’ (V, 7).<sup>61</sup> However, the silent Italian films were exhibited to a mass domestic audience (in addition to their distribution abroad and to middle-class audiences at home) as part of the film industry’s strategy to use its classical heritage for nation building. Consequently, they frequently foreground the masses and make them a protagonist in the historical action.<sup>62</sup> In Rodolfi’s film of 1913, a violently gesticulating crowd completely floods the frame in a dramatic high-angled shot as it shouts condemnation of Glaucus at his trial for murder (Fig. 6). Later, at the amphitheatre, it turns on Arbaces when it discovers it had been duped and that he was the actual perpetrator. On this sequence, the American film journal *Motography* (October 18, 1913, p. 265) commented: ‘One little scene, alone, in this arena spectacle, is worthy of the highest praise – it is that one in which we behold not hundreds, but thousands and thousands of excitement-mad spectators, demanding the life of the high priest; their arms are raised in angry protest and every face is lit with passion.’ The crowd is last seen scattering in panic from the erupting volcano, much in the style of the mass choreography utilised by the firework entrepreneur James Pain in his late-nineteenth-century outdoor extravaganza, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which had also been performed for working-class audiences in both the United States and Europe.<sup>63</sup> On the film’s exhibition in Italian opera houses, the crowd’s emotions would have been magnified at these three key points by the musical cries of a choir.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See further Blix (2009: 226-36; Goldhill (2011: 194-7).

<sup>62</sup> As Wyke (1997: esp. 17-20). Cf. Garofalo (2012: 366-70).

<sup>63</sup> For the spectacular features of Pain’s Pompeian pyrodrama, see Seydl (2012: 227-9).

<sup>64</sup> On the effects of the choral accompaniment to the film, see Dagna and Giori (2015: 39-40).

In all four films, moreover, the spectacular arena scenes borrow from nineteenth-century circus acts of horse racing, gladiator fighting and lion taming to enact through the crowd that watches on screen a defining feature of cinema – collective viewing.<sup>65</sup> The publicity for the Ambrosio film explicitly linked past to present mass spectatorship when it advertised that its arena scenes had been shot in Turin’s stadium at Piazza d’Armi and its crowds recruited from the city’s striking FIAT workers and its unemployed.<sup>66</sup> By virtue of such on- and off-screen strategies, the fiction films democratise their reconstructed Pompeii and mobilise it for contemporary Italians. They also radically differentiate the communal experience of seeing it revived on screen from the way in which the privileged few visit the ruins in the hybrid documentary released in 1906 – not appreciating, let alone participating in, the ancient city’s pain.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> For the relationship between the arena sequence of another Italian historical film and circus traditions for representing ancient Rome, see Wyke (2017: 92). Cf. Canosa (1997-8: 14-15), for the intimate relationship between such on-screen arena crowds and off-screen film spectators.

<sup>66</sup> Noted by Martinelli (1993: 316).

<sup>67</sup> I am grateful to my MA student Kate Webster for stimulating my interest in revisiting these films, and to the audiences of various versions of this article for their helpful comments.

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