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This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Dall'Asta, M., Faccioli, A. (2020). Ursus as a Serial Figure. Oxford : Oxford University Press  
[10.1093/oso/9780198867531.003.0015].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/866662> since: 2022-02-24

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198867531.003.0015>

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## Ursus as a Serial Figure

*Monica Dall'Asta and Alessandro Faccioli*

C15.P1 The figure of the strongman Ursus unquestionably occupies a central position among the enduring contributions of the Polish novel *Quo vadis* to the transnational popular culture of the twentieth century. Presented as Lygia's faithful slave and bodyguard, and consistently paralleled throughout the novel to mythological heroes like Hercules, the Cyclops, and the Titans, Ursus is described by Sienkiewicz with words that emphasize the prodigious aspect and strength of his muscular body. A 'barbarian', whose breast is 'as large as two shields joined together', Ursus is said to be a 'giant' endowed with 'dreadful', even 'preterhuman strength', able to 'break gratings' or 'a bull's neck as easily as another might a poppy stalk' and to 'lift stones from the ground which four men could not stir'. Overall, he looks 'more like a stone colossus than a man', if not even 'a demigod worthy of honor and statues' (Sienkiewicz 2016 [1896]). With so many amazing attributes, it is no wonder that Ursus was about to perform as the author's most successful creature, on its way to becoming a stock character in the transnational catalogue of twentieth-century popular culture.

C15.P2 Adding to the numerous film and television adaptations that Sienkiewicz's historical novel has spurred through more than a century, the suggestive figure of its good-hearted, Herculean saviour has been extensively imitated, under a host of different names, in a ridiculously large number of extremely popular Italian films that otherwise have no connection with Sienkiewicz's novel. There is an obvious historical link between the huge popularity enjoyed by Sienkiewicz's work in Italy at the dawn of the last century and the emergence of what was to be known as the 'cinema dei forzuti' or 'athletic-acrobatic' (pseudo-)genre, a specifically Italian occurrence featuring the strongman character type in a variety of versions and serial narrative forms.

C15.P3 This cultural phenomenon—championed by heroes called Maciste, Hercules, Samson, Goliath, and many more—flourished in Italy in two consecutive waves: an early wave that had its peak during and after World War I, and a later,

Monica Dall'Asta and Alessandro Faccioli, *Ursus as a Serial Figure* In: *The Novel of Neronian Rome and its Multimedial Transformations: Sienkiewicz's Quo vadis*. Edited by: Monika Woźniak and Maria Wyke, Oxford University Press (2020).

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DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198867531.003.00015

mid-century 'sword-and-sandal' wave between the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Together, they offer a perfect trajectory along which to investigate how a serial figure is historically created, replicated, and transformed in time through a transtextual play with their characteristic features across the products of media culture.<sup>2</sup> In the modern popular imaginary, serial figures play a major role as 'a type of stock character' whose narration across media is affected by different media forms and, in turn, reflects their medial framings and reframings, thus causing 'explicit variations or subtle revisions in the figures' various stagings' (Mayer and Denson 2018: 65). Although the serial reproduction of the Ursus character type and its adoption as the central figure of a distinctive film genre are a peculiarly Italian phenomenon, the surprisingly wide circulation that these low-budget films were able to gain abroad has contributed substantially to the extension of the transtextual legacy of *Quo vadis* through time and space.

C15.S1

### Adapting *Quo vadis* for the Screen

C15.P4 When, in 1913, the director Enrico Guazzoni chose *Quo vadis* as an inspiration for what can reasonably be considered the first 'kolossal' in the history of world cinema (a big-budget, spectacular feature film), he engaged with a novel that had actually been a favourite of Italian readers since at least 1899, when an even earlier translation (which had appeared serially in *Il Corriere di Napoli* in 1897) was first published in book form. Like Mario Caserini and Eleuterio Rodolfi, who, also in 1913, made a film adaptation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1894), Guazzoni drew on the rich narrative and graphic descriptions in Sienkiewicz's work to extend film's duration beyond existing conventions, thus making a substantial contribution to the establishment of the multireel feature film as the standard transnational format of conventional cinema.<sup>3</sup> As with the film adaptation *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* relied on lavish three-dimensional sets to create a vivid impression of ancient Rome, and made use of an even

<sup>1</sup> A canonic work in scholarship about Italian strongmen films is Farassino and Sanguineti 1983. For a comprehensive approach to the cultural history of Italian strongmen films and their relation with the epic genre, see Cornelius 2011, Aziza 2009, and Di Chiara 2016. The early wave of silent strongmen films is extensively discussed by Reich 2015 and Dall'Asta 1992. The mid-century 'sword-and-sandal' wave is discussed at length by Della Casa 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of transtextuality was proposed by Gérard Genette to refer to the 'textual transcendence of the text' (1992: 83–4).

<sup>3</sup> On Guazzoni's film, see Dagna and Wyke in this volume.

larger mass of extras (over 5,000) to increase its potential for spectacle. Matching the grandiosity of the sets, the role of Ursus was given to the imposing figure of Bruto Castellani, who was chosen by Guazzoni more because of his impressive muscles and body frame than his acting technique, which remained quite unrefined right through to the end of his career. Following the huge acclaim he received for his performance in *Quo vadis?*, Castellani appeared in about thirty other films. He was regularly hired to bring extra visual appeal in the form of his muscular male physique to such ambitious historical reconstructions as *Marcantonio and Cleopatra* (1913), *Fabiola* (1918), *Ben-Hur* (1925), *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1926), and another colossal adaptation of *Quo vadis* directed in 1925 by Georg Jacoby and the son of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Gabriellino, all of which were especially targeted at international markets.

- C15.P5 Sienkiewicz's description of the scene of sacrifice in the circus arena (when the Christians are offered to the jaws of hungry wild beasts and Ursus fights a climactic battle with the aurochs to rescue his young protégée Lygia) provided Guazzoni with quite challenging material in terms of film representation:
- C15.P6 The Lygian held the wild beast by the horns. The man's feet sank in the sand to his ankles, his back was bent like a drawn bow, his head was hidden between his shoulders, on his arms the muscles came out so that the skin almost burst from their pressure; but he had stopped the bull in his tracks. And the man and the beast remained so still that the spectators thought themselves looking at a picture showing a deed of Hercules or Theseus, or a group hewn from stone....
- C15.P7 A dull roar resembling a groan was heard from the arena, after which a brief shout was wrested from every breast, and again there was silence. People thought themselves dreaming till the enormous head of the bull began to turn in the iron hands of the barbarian. The face, neck, and arms of the Lygian grew purple; his back bent still more. It was clear that he was rallying the remnant of his superhuman strength, but that he could not last long.
- C15.P8 Duller and duller, hoarser and hoarser, more and more painful grew the groan of the bull as it mingled with the whistling breath from the breast of the giant. The head of the beast turned more and more, and from his jaws crept forth a long, foaming tongue.
- C15.P9 A moment more, and to the ears of spectators sitting nearer came as it were the crack of breaking bones; then the beast rolled on the earth with his neck twisted in death. (Sienkiewicz, trans. J. Curtin 2016 [1896]: 389–90)

C15.P10 In this extremely graphic account, Sienkiewicz is both reworking the classical Hercules/Heracles myth (and specifically the bullfight trope in the seventh episode of the hero's Twelve Labours, as referred to by Apollodorus and Isocrates) and building upon the growing fascination of his times with physical culture. The description of Ursus's body, 'still as a statue', 'crimson with effort', with his muscles swelling 'until it seemed as if his skin would burst', brings to mind the numerous photographs that, at about the same time as the composition of *Quo vadis*, Eugen Sandow was using carefully to promote his new discipline of bodybuilding across Europe and the United States. Sandow began publishing his own illustrated magazine, *Physical Culture*, in 1898. The magazine was lavishly illustrated and was a major site of development for the new practice of 'physique photography'. At about the same time, while he was starting his American stage career as a performer in Florenz Ziegfeld's company, Sandow also embraced the new medium of moving pictures. He was filmed by William K. L. Dickson at Edison Studios in 1894, and the resulting images were promptly included in his exhibition programme as soon as Dickson had devised a solution for projecting Edison kinoscope strips on screen.<sup>4</sup> Such aestheticized images of the male body are now understood, in terms of their cultural meanings, as a stereotype of modernity.<sup>5</sup>

C15.P11 In developing his concept of physical culture as an art of posing where immobility was meant to express maximum physical effort, tension, and strength, Sandow was deeply influenced by the aesthetics of classical and neo-classical sculpture and painting.<sup>6</sup> The same goes for Guazzoni, who in his film adaptation of Sienkiewicz's circus scene referred widely to Jean-Léon Gérôme's historical paintings as his primary model.<sup>7</sup> The film director's reconstruction of the circus scene, with its climax in a series of brief static shots that show Ursus resisting the bull's impetus before bringing him crashing down (a sequence obtained using a poor beast that had obviously been drugged, and a fake bull's head in the close-up shots), established the 'strong-man against animal' confrontation as one of the genre's great canonical feats,

<sup>4</sup> See Musser 1997: 90–4. For more information on Sandow's biography, see Chapman 1994.

<sup>5</sup> As George Mosse in his seminal study *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1996).

<sup>6</sup> As Wyke observes, 'the majority of photographs of Sandow's routine show him posing in imitation of a classical statue rather than performing a feat of strength' (1997b: 54).

<sup>7</sup> As Beeny writes, 'for his 1913 *Quo Vadis?* Enrico Guazzoni chose *Ave Caesar!*, *Pollice Verso*, and *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayers*—pictures with ready-made mass-cultural currency—as the anchors for a film that helped establish the Roman epic as a cinematic genre. Audiences are said to have erupted in applause each time they recognized these popular images on the screen' (2010: 50). On Gérôme as a proto-film-maker, see also Gottlieb 2010 and Păini 2010: 333–6. Cf. Wyke in this volume.

regularly repeated, with an ever increasing attempt at realism, in all subsequent adaptations of the novel.

C15.P12 A taste for the sensational, and even the scene's potential for gore, takes over in the 1925 adaptation to screen, in which a much heavier and stiffer Castellani can be seen fighting a very real, but also very drugged, large bull. Buddy Baer's performance in the Hollywood adaptation directed by Mervyn LeRoy in 1951 was made even more astonishing by a refined use of conventional film language and Technicolor.<sup>8</sup> Steve Reeves, a leader in the second wave of screen strongmen, is seen fighting the Cretan bull with his bare hands (again with the help of editing tricks and props) in Pietro Francisci's *Hercules* (1958), an exhilarating mash-up filled with low-budget special effects, in which classical antiquity's Hercules and his seventh labour were transplanted into the universe of Jason and the Argonauts.

C15.P13 Castellani adopted Ursus as a nickname in a few more films between 1918 and 1922, none of which seems to have had any points of connection with Sienkiewicz's novel. Of these titles, all set in present time, only one is still extant today, and the paucity of contemporary sources about these Ursus films leaves us with scarcely any material to discuss. Castellano regularly played the part of the strongman who tries to rescue good from evil: in *L'attentato* (dir. Henrique Santos, 1918), he appears as an athlete performing on stage before stepping up to help a rich man against a cheat;<sup>9</sup> in *Un viaggio verso la morte* (dir. Gino Zaccaria, 1920) he defends a child from attack by a couple of criminals all across the world. Made by very small production companies, none of these films seem to have done much to popularize the Ursus brand. Even the eponymous *Ursus* (aka *Ursus, il leone del porto*, dir. Pio Vanzi, 1922) passed practically unnoticed by both audiences and reviewers.

C15.P14 The only extant print of the Castellani cycle, *Il toro selvaggio* (dir. Giuseppe Zaccaria, 1919), which is preserved at the Cineteca Italiana in Milan, is a typical product of the Italian strongman film genre. Packed with some of the most obvious conventions of contemporary melodrama, it leads us through a carousel of adventurous exploits propelled by a dispute over an inheritance and involves kidnappings, disguises, interminable chases, and hand-to-hand fights. Partly set in an aristocratic environment and partly in a circus, where Ursus performs as one of its most acclaimed artists, the film exploits and even doubles the bullfight trope in two parallel scenes: the first during a circus performance; the second during a party at a patrician villa where the hosts have

<sup>8</sup> See Winkler in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> See on this film, Martinelli 1991:16.

invited the artists to reperform their tricks. Suddenly a raging bull breaks its chain and Castellani has one more opportunity to show off his strength and courage in a climactic fight against the animal.

C15.S2

### From Ursus to Maciste & Co.

C15.P15 Ursus was not the only fictional strongman to become a major attraction, and even a star, in Italian cinema before the outbreak of world war. Already in 1913, another popular strongman, Mario Guaita, had appeared onscreen in the role of Spartacus in another multireel feature production set this time in republican Rome and made in the typical style of Italian epic cinema. Previously known under the name of Ausonia, Guaita had acquired notoriety in earlier years in both Italy and France as a variety performer specializing in *poses plastiques*, a type of visual theatre in which semi-naked performers assumed highly stylized attitudes that were more or less loosely inspired by classical or neoclassical painting and sculpture, in a manner somewhat like 'living statuary' (Anae 2008: 112–30). The aesthetics of these performances, which were much appreciated around 1900, were very close to the visual style established by Sandow in his effort to enhance and promote the beauty of the male body, beginning with his famous reproduction of the pose of the Farnese Hercules in front of Henry Van der Weyde's camera in London in 1889.<sup>10</sup> *Spartacus*, Ivo Blom observes (2018: 146), 'was arguably the first Italian feature to display Ausonia's type of male physique', that is as a supple athlete as well as a strongman, who 'went on to refer to this male display in both his theatrical career and his subsequent epic and adventure films'.

C15.P16 After another major historical role in *Salambò* (1914), Guaita returned to the name of Ausonia in a series of witty adventures, all written by his wife, Renée Deliot.<sup>11</sup> While set in modern times, these films often included a number of inter- and extratextual allusions to Guaita's own biography and career as a *pose plastique* model and performer. For example, in *Dans les mansardes de Paris* (1924) 'he plays a young Parisian who drops out of medical school to seek fame and fortune, first in the circus and then through *poses plastiques*, clearly mimicking Myron's *Discobolus* and Leone Leoni's statue of *Emperor*

<sup>10</sup> For more information on early physique photography, see Burns 2011: 440–51.

<sup>11</sup> On the interesting screenwriting career of Renée Deliot—perhaps the only female professional screenwriter who was active in Italy during the silent period, and whose role in the creation of Ausonia's screen personality is critical to the development of the genre as a whole—see Micaela Veronesi's biographical entry in the Women Film Pioneers Project online portal (2018).

*Charles V as Virtue Subduing Fury*.<sup>12</sup> A similar self-reference is found at the beginning of *Latleta fantasma* (1919), which first introduces Ausonia posing ‘in antique attire, leaning on a column, reminding us of his previous feats on and off the screen. The image transforms into Ausonia dressed as a gentleman in tails. Finally, we see him wearing a knitted hood over his ‘frac’ [a swallowtail coat] changing him into the “phantom athlete” from the film’s title’ (Blom 2018: 152).

C15.P17 A third, and much more successful, internationally acclaimed screen strongman came into being in 1914 in one of the most ambitious antiquity films of all time, *Cabiria*, directed and produced in Turin by Giovanni Pastrone. In organizing this truly gigantic enterprise, Pastrone had made every effort to ensure the collaboration of Gabriele D’Annunzio, the renowned poet and novelist, who was involved in the preparation of the final film script.<sup>13</sup> While the plot and the different characters of this innovative epic production—including the powerful figure of Maciste, a giant black slave—were already clearly delineated in the initial script drafted by Pastrone, D’Annunzio has been credited at least with authoring the elaborate, and quite pretentious, intertitles that punctuate the visual sequences. He was also responsible for giving Maciste his extraordinarily lucky name that, in Italian, sounds very much like the word ‘macigno’, a stone or a rock. More precisely, ‘macigno’ derives from the Latin *machineus*, which in turn derives from *machina*, meaning the stone used for grinding grains, that is a millstone.

C15.P18 Pastrone chose for this role Bartolomeo Pagano, a docker at the harbour of Genoa, who went on to perform in dozens of films in the 1920s, becoming exemplary of the brand new strongman genre, and one of the greatest international male stars of his time.<sup>14</sup> The scenes in which Maciste, captured by the Phoenicians, is enchained and forced to push a millstone round is only one clue among several of *Cabiria*’s debt to *Quo vadis*? We can observe a clear transtextual elaboration of this trope through various steps: at first, in Sienkiewicz’s novel, Ursus is simply one of the ‘slaves and hired labour working in [Demas’s] flour mill’, then, in Guazzoni’s film adaptation, we actually see him pushing the stone round in a brief medium shot that emphasizes his powerful build; finally, in *Cabiria*, after being caught by the Phoenicians during his quest to save the young Cabiria, the strongman Maciste (more unfortunate than Ursus) is condemned to be ‘chained to the millstone for life’.

<sup>12</sup> As Blom again observes, ‘this trajectory parallels Ausonia’s real-life story’ (2018: 149).

<sup>13</sup> A well-documented collection of scholarly studies on *Cabiria*’s production history is offered in Alovio and Barbera 2006.

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the characters of male stardom in Italian silent cinema, see Lotti 2016.



- C15.P19 *Cabiria* exploits the trope to create one of its most memorable scenes in which Maciste is encouraged by his master Fulvio Axilla (who has finally found the place of his detention) to perform an extreme feat of strength: he breaks the iron chains that keep him attached to the mill. Immediately chosen as a key attraction to illustrate one of the sensational posters used to advertise the film, Maciste's *pose plastique* in this scene was made much more visually appealing than anything previously seen in *Quo vadis?* by a bolder display of Pagano's muscular build, covered just by a leopard skin around his genitals.
- C15.P20 There are more hints of *Cabiria's* transtextual dialogue with *Quo vadis?* Like Ursus, Maciste is a slave, assigned by his master Axilla the task of delivering a young girl from her Phoenician kidnappers. Maciste too is consistently represented as both a good slave faithful to his master and a simple heart imbued with an inner innocence that contrasts sharply with the terrible power of his muscles. Also, just like Ursus, he serves his mistress/protégée with paternal care, never showing any kind of romantic interest towards her. However, the black-polish tint used all over Pagano's face and body to feign African origins gives an additional visual appeal (both exotic and erotic) to the display of his muscles over that of Castellani's. Although his African origins are no doubt a significant departure from the status of Ursus as a Christianized 'barbarian', Maciste's different ethnicity still marks him as other, establishing the convention of the strongman as foreigner that would reappear in the films of the sound period.
- C15.P21 Pastrone also drew on Ausonia to sketch the character of his strongman saviour. In particular, towards the end of the film, the scene in which Maciste proves his superhuman strength by bending the bars of the prison in which he is locked with Axilla repeats a similar feat already performed by Ausonia in *Spartacus*,<sup>15</sup> thus incorporating it forever into the repertoire of the strongman's screen performances. This same feat is again repeated at the beginning of *Maciste*, the 1915 production that launched Pagano's hero in a new film series shot in modern settings. *Maciste* presents the viewer with one of the most ingenious metafilmic devices to be found possibly throughout the whole silent era, and perhaps beyond. The plot goes as follows: on the run to escape kidnapping from a criminal gang, a young woman takes refuge in a film theatre. Onscreen she sees Maciste as he performs the bar-bending feat in *Cabiria* and is transported with wonder at the sight of such an act of superhuman strength, executed to defend a damsel in distress. Back in reality outside the

<sup>15</sup> 'This bar-bending feat was so successful that Ausonia repeated it in his subsequent epic, *Salambò* (Domenico Gaido, 1914), released in 1915 and based on Flaubert's novel,' according to Blom 2018: 148.

cinema, she decides to look for the actor impersonating Maciste at the Itala studios in Turin, where Bartolomeo Pagano, by now an acclaimed film star in his own right, immediately agrees to defend her against the villains.

C15.P22 Received with immense enthusiasm by both Italian and international audiences, this metafilmic sequel to *Cabiria* and its spin-off Maciste series soon came to epitomize the Italian strongman genre, establishing a model extensively imitated in subsequent years. After the modern turn impressed on the genre by *Maciste*, both Castellani and Guaita abandoned their surroundings in classical antiquity and had their fictional alter egos perform in contemporary plots and settings. By 1920 the number of strongmen, and strongwomen, involved in the film industry had multiplied to include the likes of Luciano Albertini (Sansone), Giovanni Raicevich (a former professional Graeco-Roman wrestler, and world champion in 1907), Domenico Gambino (Saetta), Alfredo Boccolini (Galaor), Francesco Casaleggio (Fracassa), Astrea (a mysterious performer who featured in four films and was dubbed ‘the female Maciste’), and several more.<sup>16</sup>

C15.P23 While all these actors and actresses had their own individual features and performing styles, from a narrative angle they were all very similar, concentrating in their displayed muscles the ideal of the gentle giant who defends the harmless not for personal advantage but for the sole purpose of restoring justice in a world that has been disrupted by evil forces. He is generous and loyal, but hopelessly naïve and not particularly clever. He ‘tends to be a legitimist’ with regard to established powers and institutions, ‘yet at the same time he represents a primitive anxiety about justice’ (Della Casa 2002: 31). Basically asexual despite his exhibitions of virility, the strongman type never represents a danger to female characters (unless, of course, they team up with the villains). As a (demi-)*deus ex machina*, the strongman intervenes at the most dramatic points of the plot to suspend the narrative and solve the current predicament thanks to the (sometimes motionless) action of his spectacular body. This provides the films with a characteristic paratactic pace of narration that reveals their essentially primitive, or ‘attractional’, style. All these aspects remain the basic traits of the strongman type throughout the second, mid-century wave of the genre.

C15.P24 The term ‘cinema of attractions’ was coined to describe the visual style of early cinema by the so-called New Film History movement that emerged at the end of the 1970s. The term ‘attraction’ refers to the pure visual pleasure engendered by the display of the more or less bizarre curiosities that

<sup>16</sup> For a short account in English of the first wave of strongman films, see Dall’Asta 2013: 195–202.

constitute privileged material for so many early films. In the absence of a fully developed editing style for its narratives, early cinema relied on a succession of sensational 'tableaux' to solicit viewers' attention. The role of editing was mainly limited to the assembly of different attractions, in such a way as to shape a paratactic progression, where narrative action proper was often presented merely in the form of descriptive intertitles and where the spectacle consisted in large doses of extravagant visual experiences.<sup>17</sup> More than fifty years later, the 'sword-and-sandal', or 'historical–mythological', films of Italian popular cinema maintained a similar paratactic pace, with the narrative essentially used as 'padding' between the muscular exhibitions of the leading characters.

C15.P25 In one important respect, however, the serial strongmen of both the genre's first and second waves emulated the Ursus of *Quo vadis?* rather more than the Maciste of *Cabiria*—in their display of whiteness. According to Jacqueline Reich, the 'racial repositioning' of Maciste from *Cabiria* to the spin-off series set in the present allowed the character to be recast in the model of a white national hero. The retrospective framing of 'Maciste's previous onscreen blackness in *Cabiria* as masquerade' (Reich 2015: 52)<sup>18</sup> put later versions of him in a detached, ironic, and therefore superior position to his earlier fictional identity. The move from antiquity to modernity occurred 'within the context of rising Italian nationalism of the 1910s' (Reich 2015: 53) and paralleled the move from a rhetoric based on 'icon[s] of ancient glories' to new 'exemplary symbol[s] of modern and entertaining Italian heroism' (Reich 2015: 80):

C15.P26 Maciste's racial transformation from slave in *Cabiria* to bourgeois citizen in *Maciste* necessitated a costume change from toga to dapper suit. The uniform he wears when he goes to war (*Maciste Alpino*) and assumes the role of emperor (*Maciste imperatore*) are markers, just like his muscles, of his nationalized virility. Equally important are the clothes he does not adorn; his naked torso, so frequently featured in all the films, reveals that no matter what role he plays, Maciste is all man and all Italian. (Reich 2015: 20)

C15.P27 In fact, in their exhibition of gratuitous violence toward their enemies, the strongmen of the genre's silent period are prone to farcical accents, and even

<sup>17</sup> See Strauwen 2006.

<sup>18</sup> The theme of Maciste's ethnicity is also discussed at length in brilliant postcolonialist terms by Giuliani 2019: 65–76.

to an open taste for punishment that can easily be linked to the emergence of proto-fascistic structures of feeling.

C15.P28 Despite many differences, the mode of address and narrative organization of the second, mid-century strongmen cycle are in continuity with that structure of feeling, according to Richard Dyer. His complex sociological explanation addresses aspects like the Italian audience's class composition (mainly formed, for these low-budget films, by recently urbanized peasants)<sup>19</sup> in a period of 'mass internal migration in Italy from the rural South to the industrialized North'; the transformation 'from labour based on strength to one based on skill with machines' (Dyer 1997: 169); and a more or less unconscious assumption that 'the interests of ordinary people are met, and are only able to be met, by the strongman' (Dyer 1997: 176). Dyer (1997: 169) concludes that, while 'the very emphasis on the simple display of muscle [is] an affirmation of the value of strength to an audience who was finding that it no longer has such value', the mid-century strongmen are also forms of 'divine characters played by US Americans. If they speak to the realities of their initial audiences and in many particulars seem to be of them, they are also above them.' It is to the features of those Americanized strongmen and their relation to the original Ursus that we now turn.

C15.S3

### Ursus as Maciste, and Vice Versa

C15.P29 The new wave of strongmen films began and developed as a low-budget imitation of the American historical epics that were shot in Cinecittà during the 1950s. The latter phenomenon began with Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* and continued throughout the decade with several superproductions such as *Helen of Troy* (dir. Robert Wise, 1956), *Ben-Hur* (dir. William Wyler, 1959), *Cleopatra* (dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963), among others. Shot in Technicolor, the American *Quo Vadis* features in the role of Ursus the hulking Buddy Baer, the brother of the world heavyweight champion Max, who was famous for having defeated in 1934 Primo Carnera, another giant who was also to become a favourite of the silver screen during the 1930s and 1940s. His semi-nudity showcases his impressive build in the memorable sequence in the arena in which he defends Lygia (here tied to a pole) from the raging bull,

<sup>19</sup> As shown by Spinazzola 1974, these films were intentionally made to circulate in second- and third-rate cinemas.

snapping its neck at the close of an exacting struggle.<sup>20</sup> Yet the realism of the scene is created through masterful editing that alternates Baer's image with that of a stunt double, Nuno Salvação Barreto, who specialized offscreen in a Portuguese variation of bullfighting.

C15.P30 The (re)making of *Quo Vadis* in Cinecittà marked a turning point in the history of Italian cinema.<sup>21</sup> The first American superproduction shot in Rome, it not only contributed financially to the revival of the Italian film industry but also encouraged Italian directors and producers to take up the 'sword-and-sandal' genre as a popular cultural favourite. Unlike the first wave of muscular cinema, which soon shifted the settings of its stories from ancient to modern times, these mid-century productions were invariably set in a mythological past. Ursus is just one of the names that the strongman takes up in these films; other recurrent heroes are Hercules, Maciste, Goliath, and Samson. And yet, the paradoxical seriality that characterized the genre—based on hasty, low-budget productions that tried to replicate at artisanal scale Hollywood's industrial methods of mass production—generated a situation in which viewers were encouraged to see all the different embodiments of the strongman as manifestations of one and the same hero. For example, of the nine films that have Ursus as lead hero, only three are interpreted by the same actor (Ed Fury); the other six feature actors who, in other productions, are cast as Maciste or Hercules (among them Reg Park, Joe Robinson, Dan Vadis, and Samson Burke). The same goes for all the other heroes. The cluster concerning Hercules (which, having been initiated by Pietro Francisci's international hit *Hercules* in 1958, scored a total of nineteen films in around seven years) had up to twelve different actors perform the title role.

C15.P31 The peculiar instability of this type of seriality was even augmented on the international market, where any particular hero could be presented under a different name in translation. For example, the English titles of many of the Maciste films regularly changed his name to Atlas, Samson, or Goliath—or, of course, Hercules or the Son of Hercules. Ursus was introduced to English-speaking audiences as 'Maciste, the Son of Hercules' in several instalments of a syndicated television show, broadcast in the United States in the 1960s and distributed by Embassy Pictures, that recycled thirteen strongmen films from Italy. Ursus, Maciste, Samson, Goliath, and Hercules are all the interchangeable masks of one and the same hero, who is reduced to being no more than a narrative function, a sort of dummy, ready to don ever more numerous

<sup>20</sup> See also Winkler in this volume for discussion of the scene in *Quo Vadis* (1951).

<sup>21</sup> See Stubbs in this volume.

fictional identities as he experiences ever more stunning adventures in ever new settings.

C15.P32 These settings were actually not so new. The artisanal, craft skills utilized in the Italian production model were largely based on a logic of recycling, which involved the frequent reuse of sets, costumes, and props from other more expensive productions. Francisci's *Hercules* of 1958 is said to have recycled sets from *Aida* (dir. Claudio Fracassi, 1953), a boat from *Ulysses* (dir. Mario Camerini, 1954), and costumes from LeRoy's *Quo Vadis*. The spurious origin of the materials employed in the films' production is reflected at the semantic level in the miscellaneous catalogue of tropes that constitutes the diegetic worlds in which the adventures of Ursus and his other Herculean fellows take place. In other words, both the chronological and geographical coordinates of these worlds are as unstable and inconsistent as the strongman hero's own characterization, resulting in his preposterous wandering across many centuries and distant lands, either real or purely fantastic.

C15.P33 The plot of *Ursus* (the first in a cycle of nine films featuring the strongman under this name, shot in Spain in 1961 by Maciste specialist Carlo Campogalliani)<sup>22</sup> is a case in point. The story is reminiscent of Sienkiewicz's original in reinstating the conventional trope of the young virgin threatened by a raging bull in the circus arena, but the space-time coordinates of the diegetic world are totally confused—much like the hero who, we will discover, is in love with the wrong woman. All that we know about him at the beginning is that he is coming home from abroad after serving in a war, eager to reunite with his beloved fiancée, Attea. Learning that she has been kidnapped by the villain Setas, he leaves to rescue her in the company of a beautiful young girl, the (very blonde) slave Doreide. When they finally reach a mysterious island, they discover that Attea (a glacial brunette) has in fact gone over to the enemy and been crowned the queen of the evil realm. Ursus and Doreide obviously become the targets of her cruelty and once again end up in the arena. Here, after performing the chain-breaking feat first seen in *Cabiria*, Ursus engages in a difficult fight with the bull. The brutal realism of this new version of the bullfight scene is again augmented in comparison with previous adaptations of *Quo vadis*. The bull does not seem to be drugged, and the Spanish stuntman, Ray Pololo, who doubles for the (very blonde)

<sup>22</sup> Several years earlier Campogalliani had directed Pagano in *The Trilogy of Maciste*, a series released in 1920 in three full-length episodes. He was also responsible for inaugurating the second Maciste cycle in 1960 with *Son of Samson* that had Mark Forest in the title role.



C15.F1 **Fig. 15.1** Ursus fights the bull; screenshot from *Ursus* (dir. C. Campogalliani, 1961). United Archives GmbH/Alamy Stock Photo.

Ed Fury is rammed and gored several times with great violence by the animal (Figure 15.1).<sup>23</sup>

C15.P34 *Ursus* (1961) illustrates the contradictory relationship of the strongman with women, as he prefers to pursue an idealized, romantic image of a woman who turns out to be villainous rather than recognize the love of the beautiful Doreide, who follows him submissively. In recent times, the problematic relationships of the second-wave strongmen have inspired some readings in terms of queer critique. Mauro Giori (2017: 90), for example, observes that ‘the peplum hero is not even a proper man, sexually speaking. He is too narcissistic and “reconciled with the dimension of desire” to be credibly interested in female partners.’<sup>24</sup> Thus these strongmen have constantly encouraged ironic comments in the press about their substantial ‘weakness’ and ‘delicacy’, with explicit reference to the films’ homosexual subtext.

<sup>23</sup> YouTube has an interview with Pololo in which he recalls how the scene was performed—an interesting document of the way in which these low-budget films were made in their time. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLmPFj3EQ4/> (accessed 10 January 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Giori is quoting a phrase from Giacomo Manzoli 2012: 110. A similar point is made by Rushing 2016.

C15.P35 The mid-century version of Ursus also demonstrates the essentially fantastic character of the ‘sword-and-sandal’ imagination. In the subsequent *Ursus and the Tartar Princess* (dir. Remigio Del Grosso, 1961), a film set in the seventeenth century that includes some impressive crowd scenes, Ursus is a Polish peasant without any apparent reference to Sienkiewicz’s novel where he originates from Lygia (identified as Poland’s ancient territory). This Ursus has escaped from a Siberian prison; at one point he is shown wielding his halberd successfully to hurl the entire cavalry of the blasphemous and destructive Tartars from a wooden bridge. In *The Vengeance of Ursus* (dir. Luigi Capuano, 1961), which takes place in antiquity, in an unknown country located in a fabulous Middle East, he works the land in the tradition of his father and alongside his younger brother, loathes a tyrant, and must face ordeals of deadly strength and skill, including a fight in which he is outnumbered by eleven men. In *Ursus in the Valley of the Lions* (dir. Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia, 1962), he is given a narrative backstory that sounds very much like that of Tarzan: abandoned by his mother as an infant in her desperate attempt to save him from the cruel Ayak (come with his hordes of barbarians ‘from the deserts and wild regions of the North’), Ursus is raised by lions. The spectacular finale showcases an impressive choreography created with animals trained by the famous Orfei circus family. *Ursus the Rebel Gladiator* (dir. Domenico Paolella, 1963) brings us back to the Roman era of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, taking advantage of the widescreen technology of CinemaScope to portray some epic scenes of legions and cavalry deployed for battle.

C15.P36 *Son of Hercules in the Land of Fire* (*Ursus nella terra di fuoco*, dir. Giorgio Simonelli, 1963) is an emblematic case in terms of recycling, offering some interesting examples of a common practice in this field of film-making—the reuse of pre-existing footage. Scenes showing earthquakes, eruptions, or rockslides were all borrowed from many, often unrecognizable, previous films. The hyperbolic feats of the muscular protagonist take place in an unspecified diegetic time where aspects of ancient Rome are mashed up with Germanic and medieval elements. The picturesque mountain landscapes where both the love and the battle scenes take place are unusual for Italian cinema and are some of the film’s most intriguing features. There are also impossible crossovers that bring the various heroes together, into a marvellous no man’s land that is home to the characters of a pseudo-historical society, such as in *Samson and the Mighty Challenge* (dir. Giorgio Capitani, 1965), originally distributed as *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus, gli invincibili*. All these films widely exploit the trope of Ursus in chains pushing the mechanisms of a gigantic wheel in a circular motion.



- C15.P37 The reasons behind the huge success of these films in Italy were certainly linked to the fast development of post-war society during the economic boom. As Gian Piero Brunetta argues (1993: 396):
- C15.P38 The imagination of a mythical past served as a means to escape by means of fantasy from everyday reality, offered to an audience who had just arrived on the threshold of the society of consumption, who still recognized itself in the values of a patriarchal society that was about to disappear. . . . A modern version of classic epic works, [these films] are fragments of an era in which a whole civilization, stepping forward toward the new industrial world, takes its leave of an idealized, ennobled past. Just at the moment when industrial production was dismissing the role of the individual as the fundamental unit with which to measure reality, these mythological films naïvely reinstated their anthropocentric thrust.
- C15.P39 In this sense, the choice to conflate the role of the hero with the super-pumped physiques of American bodybuilders like Steve Reeves, Mark Forest, Reg Park, Gordon Scott, Ed Fury, and Dan Vadis, but also of such very Italian strongmen as Adriano Bellini and Sergio Cioni (respectively renamed Kirk Morris and Alan Steel) and many more, was an ingenious way to negotiate symbolically the contradictions of this historical clash between two hugely contrasting social models. The second-wave strongmen in their physique embodied an idealized past, but in their national identity, real or imagined, they represented the present industrial world.
- C15.P40 Yet it is important to recall that the success of these serial strongmen films was not restricted within the borders of Italy. These truly transnational heroes were particularly popular in France and Spain, but they also circulated in many other European and American countries, often in hilarious translations that enhanced their absurdity and made them a perfect object for 'camp' processes of re-evaluation and re-semanticization. The first Hercules films distributed in the United States by Joe Levine, for example, enjoyed a thorough and quite humorous restyling at the hands of its dubbing director, Mel Brooks (Della Casa 2000: 789).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> According to McKenna 2016: 48, the initiator of the phenomenon of the 'peplum boom' in the United States, Joseph E. Levine, used to argue that 'it wouldn't matter who played Hercules as long as it was a man with a tremendous body'. Indeed, Joe may have admired Reeves's muscular frame, but he deemed his voice too high-pitched for the powerful man-god and so had it dubbed over by George Gonneau—an electrical engineer. 'Stars, they're not important. It's the story and the title that count.' The amusing story of how Levine designed the American promotional campaign for the Hercules films he previously acquired on the 'Italian movie supermarket' is also related in McKenna 2016.

C15.P41 This, then, is how Ursus became a serial figure in the course of the twentieth century, operating as a gear in the always unfinished industrial processes that constantly reshape the materials of popular culture. Two more recent adaptations of *Quo vadis* (a miniseries produced by the Italian television network RAI in 1985 and a Polish superproduction directed in 2001 by Jerzy Kawalerowicz) have added little to the Ursus filmography, but a third wave of epic films exploiting the visual appeal of robust, well-built male actors has emerged since the turn of this century. American productions such as *Gladiator* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2000), *300* and its sequel *300: Rise of an Empire* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2007 and 2014), *Clash of the Titans* (dir. Louis Leterrier, 2010), *Immortals* (dir. Tarsem Singh, 2011), *Pompeii* (dir. Paul W. S. Anderson, 2014), and, of course, *Hercules* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2014) and *The Legend of Hercules* (dir. Renny Harlin, 2014) have ‘set a new standard for physiques onscreen, blending the cuts of a comic-book superhero with the classical lines of Jacques-Louis David’s “Leonidas at Thermopylae”—all while looking dirtier, tougher, and more defined than either.’<sup>26</sup> In the time of digital effects, plastic surgery, scientific nutrition, doping, and extreme training there is apparently no limit to the ability of the male body to contort itself according to the idealizations of a cartoonish aesthetic. The incessant rhythm at which the cultural industries of our time consume, revisit, and rework all the cultural assets that have been passed on to us from the past may suggest that, perhaps, not even Ursus can be deemed exempt from such a destiny in the near future.

<sup>26</sup> This evocative phrase is extracted from an internet article published on the bodybuilding.com website (Nick Collias, ‘Fit For Battle: The New Bodies Of 300: Rise Of An Empire’, 9 March 2014), which includes an interview with Mark Twight, physical trainer on the sets of both *300* and *300: Rise of an Empire*; <https://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/fit-for-battle-the-new-bodies-of-300-rise-of-an-empire.html> (accessed 30 June 2019).