

Ad urbem condendam

Film Genre and Style in the Foundation of Rome

Martin M. Winkler

Abstract

The mythic-historical tale about Romulus, Remus, and the foundation of Rome has been told on screen only a few times. Most noteworthy are two Italian films: Sergio Corbucci's *Romolo e Remo* (*Duel of the Titans*, 1961) and Matteo Rovere's *Il primo re* (*The First King: Birth of an Empire*, 2019). Corbucci's is an example of the *peplum* (sword-and-sandal) genre popular at its time and carries strong stylistic overtones of the Western, the cinema's ultimate heroic genre, in which Corbucci was soon to become famous. By contrast, Rovere's version is a dark anti-epic, emphasizing a society's desolate and violent first stage.

The worldwide success of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) brought ancient Greece and Rome back to prominence in the cinema. Early in the film, a huge battle against Germanic barbarians has just been won at great cost. It leads to an intimate conversation between Emperor Marcus Aurelius and Maximus, his victorious general:

Maximus: Five thousand of my men are out there in the freezing mud. Three thousand are cleaved and bloodied. Two thousand will never leave this place. I will not believe they fought and died for nothing.

Marcus: And what would you believe?

Maximus: They fought for *you* and for Rome.

Marcus: And what is Rome, Maximus?

Maximus: I have seen much of the rest of the world. It is brutal and cruel and dark. Rome is the light.¹

What *Gladiator* will later show of the city belies Maximus' response. Most of this Rome is gloomy, even though there are occasional glimpses of sunshine and a rather kitschy sunrise at the end. Even the imperial palace is shrouded in *chiaroscuro* light. This darkness is, as usual, symbolic. So is the prominence of the Colosseum, arena of blood and death. Rome is a city of tyranny, conspiracy, slaughter. Maximus is in the wrong film.

Gladiator returns us to the view, standard in modern popular culture, of a Roman Empire characterized by dictatorship, military conquest, corruption, sexual depravity, and bloody games. Usually in the cinema, Rome is just what Maximus said about the rest of the world. Yet Crassus, the sophisticated villain

¹ *Gladiator*. USA 2000. Dir. Ridley Scott. Quoted from the Sapphire Series Blu-ray edition (UPC: 097360715842). It contains both the original and an extended cut of the film. The dialogue takes place at 00:23:50–00:24:17 of the original and 00:25:00–00:25:26 of the extended version.

of Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), could call Rome, memorably if inaccurately, "an eternal thought in the mind of God." This echoes, no doubt unintentionally, the perspective on *Roma aeterna* as evinced, for instance, by Horace in his *Roman Odes* and *Carmen saeculare*. Such a Rome is the result of, and the reward for, what Virgil in the *Aeneid* called the *moles* of its pre-foundational origins, Aeneas' labors and sacrifices to find a new home for the survivors of the fall of Troy and their descendants: *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*.²

On the screen, this *moles* has been shown only once: in Franco Rossi's *Eneide* (1971). It is in diametrical contrast to Giorgio Ferroni's *La leggenda di Enea* (*The Avenger*, 1962), a sequel to Ferroni's *La guerra di Troia* (*The Trojan Horse* or *The Wooden Horse of Troy*, 1961). Both are examples of *peplums*, muscleman epics about ancient myth and history popular in the 1950s and 1960s. None other than Steve Reeves, who started the cycle as Hercules, is Aeneas in both films.³ The foundation of Rome itself, which required a new heroic *moles* after that of Aeneas, is the subject of two notable films: Sergio Corbucci's *Romolo e Remo* (*Duel of the Titans*, 1961) and Matteo Rovere's *Il primo re* (*The First King: Birth of an Empire*, 2019). Both are loose retellings of mythic-historical events about the founding of Rome.⁴

At the height of the *peplum* genre, exteriors of several films were shot on Spanish locations. It did not take long before Italian screenwriters and directors – and screenwriters who would become directors – realized that the Spanish countryside was ideal for another popular genre: the Western. Among them were Sergio Leone, Sergio Corbucci, and Duccio Tessari, to name only the three most influential ones.⁵ Leone had had the original idea for *Romolo e Remo*.⁶ Before, Corbucci had worked on *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 1959), which was directed, without screen credit, by Leone and chiefly written by him, Tessari, and Corbucci. Tessari was also assistant director, Corbucci was second-unit director. During the filming, Corbucci had a sudden insight:

² Verg. Aen. 1.33.

³ Reeves's Hercules films were directed by Pietro Francisci: *Le fatiche di Ercole* (*Hercules*, 1958) and *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (*Hercules Unchained*, 1959).

⁴ The best-known ancient sources are Dion. Hal. ant. 1.71–2.29, Liv. 1.3–16, and Plut. Rom. On the subject see T. P. Wiseman: *Remus. A Roman Myth*, Cambridge 1995, and the following works, among yet others, by archeologist Andrea Carandini: *Roma. Romolo, Remo e la fondazione della città*, Milan 2000; *Remo e Romolo. Dai rioni dei Quiriti alla città dei Romani: 775/750–700/675 a.C. circa*, Turin 2006; and *La fondazione di Roma*, Rome / Bari 2013.

⁵ On these directors and the connections between the two genres see Christopher Frayling: *Sergio Leone. Something to Do with Death*, London 2000; Fabio Meelli: *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang. Il cinema di Duccio Tessari*, Milan 2013; Vincent Jourdan: *Voyage dans le cinéma di Sergio Corbucci*, La Madeleine 2018. On the early collaborations between and among Corbucci, Leone, and Tessari see now Marcello Garofalo: *Il cinema è mito. Vita e film di Sergio Leone*, Rome 2020, pp. 69–93 (chapter on *peplum*). On the cultural background of the Italian Western see Christopher Frayling: *Spaghetti Westerns. Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*, rev. ed., London 1998.

⁶ Details in Frayling: *Sergio Leone* (Fn. 5), pp. 105–107.

I saw that in Spain there were these magnificent horses, these extraordinary canyons, this desert landscape which looked a lot like Mexico, or Texas, or rather, like we imagined them to be. So when we were shooting *Pompeii*, we often said to each other, “Hang on a minute, we could make an amazing Western here, couldn’t we?”

Corbucci believed that “many of the characteristics of the peplum (the stylish superhero, the desert settings, the flamboyant visual style, the ritualized duels, the ironic relationship with Hollywood)” could be continued in Westerns, the quintessential heroic film genre.⁷

The screenwriters for *Romolo e Remo* were, besides Corbucci himself, Leone and Tessari. The next year, Corbucci directed *Il figlio di Spartacus* (*The Slave*, 1962) intended to cash in on Kubrick’s *Spartacus*. Four years later, Corbucci made film history with *Django*, one of the most influential of all Italian Westerns. Enzo Barboni, Corbucci’s cameraman on *Romolo e Remo*, *Il figlio di Spartacus*, and *Django*, would in turn launch, in 1970, the phenomenon of the Terence Hill / Bud Spencer comedy Westerns under his directorial pseudonym E. B. Clucher.

Contemporary critics took a dim view of the peplum genre, but they were immediately aware that *Romolo e Remo* was stylistically almost a Western. The anonymous reviewer for the influential *Centro Cattolico Cinematografico* was concise in his summary: “The facts and characters that, according to legend, lead up to the foundation of the city of Rome are presented under the aspect of an adventure story, one that imports, and whose rhythm calls to mind, the Western film. Within these very specific limits, the work does not lack its own smooth suggestiveness.”⁸ Corbucci himself, looking back on his experiences, concurred: “above all, I was a fan of Westerns, and for that reason my ancient Romans moved about a bit like pioneers, like sheriffs; the sword at their side was like a six-shooter.”⁹

Romolo e Remo shows us a famous tale about well-known ancient heroes, modernized by the visual style of the American Western, a fusion made possible by common denominators: great heroes, dastardly villains, and beautiful women as heroes’ love interests. But *Romolo e Remo* is even more of a fusion: not only of the Herculean *peplum* with the Western but also with the Tarzan films. This becomes obvious in the casting of Corbucci’s title characters. Remus was played

⁷ The two quotations are from Frayling: Sergio Leone (Fn. 5), p. 95. He adds that Leone did not remember this kind of conversation. See further Garofalo: *Il cinema è mito* (Fn. 5), pp. 100–101, quoting Corbucci.

⁸ Quoted, in my translation, from Gianfranco Casadio: *I mitici eroi. Il cinema “peplum” nel cinema italiano dall’avventura del sonoro a oggi (1930–1993)*, Ravenna 2007, p. 236. The original: “I fatti ed i personaggi che prelusero, secondo la leggenda, alla Fondazione della città di Roma sono presentati sotto l’aspetto d’un racconto d’avventure, il cui impianto ed il cui ritmo ricordano il film western. In questi ben precisi limiti, l’opera non manca di una sua facile suggestività.”

⁹ Quoted, in my translation, from Franca Faldini / Goffredo Fofi: *L’avventurosa storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 2: *Da Ladri di biciclette a La grande Guerra*, Bologna 2011, p. 375. The original: “soprattutto io ero un patito dei film western e perciò i miei antichi romani si muovono un po’ come dei pionieri, degli sceriffi, la spada al fianco era come una pistola.”

by Gordon Scott, who is generally regarded as the most accomplished Tarzan of the color-and-widescreen era. He had played another famous musclemán, Maciste, in two films of 1961. Maciste had been invented by writer-producer-director Giovanni Pastrone and named by famous Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio for the silent epic *Cabiria* of 1914. D'Annunzio coined the name Maciste after Hercules and his cult name *Herakles Makistos*.¹⁰ Romulus was played by Steve Reeves, who had previously played the hero in Leone's *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*. Soon after playing Romulus, he was Randus (Rando in the Italian original), the hero of *Il figlio di Spartacus*.

Several sequences and moments in *Romolo e Remo* stand out for their Western look. These include a horse race with the requisite falls of horse and rider, more horse falls seen in panoramic long shots, a herd of horses being driven through a rocky canyon into a corral as dust clouds rise dramatically (Ill. 1), a 'wagon train' of ox-drawn carts on its way through another rocky landscape, riders seen against a big sky, wooden palisades guarding a 'fort,' and more. Romulus, the winner of the horse race, rides a (not quite) white horse and will have a spotlessly white one later. The white-hat-vs.-black-hat cliché recurs at the climax, when Romulus and Remus have become mortal enemies. No duel between them is reported in any ancient source, but the two bodybuilders deliver a thrilling action scene. Romulus, the 'good guy,' is wearing white, a nice contrast with the dark outfit worn by Remus, the 'bad guy' (Ill. 2). Remus interrupts Romulus while the latter is guiding a team of oxen to plow the furrow indicating the future walls of Rome; Romulus' animals are white, too. The implications may be subliminal, but they are not exactly subtle.

An unusually long English-language trailer emphasized the visual attractions of color and widescreen filming. The omniscient narrator tells us what will be at stake:

This is the dawn of history [...]: people savage and barbarous, living in the shadow of constant terror, danger, and desperation. [...] Thus begins the story of the birth of Rome, the city of the mighty Caesars, in magnificent CinemaScope and gorgeous Technicolor.

The narrator does not omit the stereotypical "countless despots and dictators" who later rose and fell in Rome or the city's importance for Christianity. He lures potential viewers with the promise of "the Titanic struggles which preceded the building of the most powerful empire of all time: The Roman Empire!" But more important is the result that those we see engaged in such struggles will eventually bring about, for the film tells "the story of the birth of the greatest city in the world: the Eternal City, the magic city of Rome." This makes everything, even

¹⁰ Details about *Cabiria* and Maciste are in Martin M. Winkler: *The Roman Salute. Cinema, History, Ideology*, Columbus 2009, pp. 114–116. Maciste returned to Italian screens in the 1960s, but for foreign releases he was routinely renamed Hercules (or, in Scott's cases, Samson and Goliath).



Ill. 1: A herd of horses being driven through a rocky canyon (Romolo e Remo. Italy 1961. Dir. Sergio Corbucci.)



Ill. 2: Romulus and Remus fighting, wearing white and dark clothes respectively (Romolo e Remo. Italy 1961. Dir. Sergio Corbucci.)

fratricide, worthwhile. *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem cinematograficae.*

Il primo re, released more than half a century after *Romolo e Remo*, shows us something radically different from *peplum* films.¹¹ It was conceived as an anti-epic and a nearly complete de-heroization of its subject. This is understandable because the cycle of the *peplum* has long been passé (except among aficionados) and is today likely to elicit only derision at the naïve portrayals of its characters and at its exuberantly fanciful costumes and architectural settings. As *Gladiator* and other historical or mythical epics demonstrate, something different is needed in the twenty-first century. But the Italian film industry never had the deep pockets necessary to rival Hollywood epics, so something yet different is required.

Il primo re illustrates, no doubt without being aware of doing so, Maximus' words about the world at large: "It is brutal and cruel and dark." The primitive beginning of an emerging society in *Il primo re* exceeds the kind of dawn of history or civilization that the trailer for *Romolo e Remo* referred to. Rather, it resembles, with some obvious differences, what British philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote in his *Leviathan* of 1651 about human society in times of war. His description culminates in a famous and oft-quoted expression:

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.¹²

The passage quoted comes from Chapter 13 of Part 1 of *Leviathan*; the chapter title is revealing: "Of the NATURALL CONDITION of Mankind, as concerning their Felicity, and Misery."

As it was to Thomas Hobbes, civil war had been, to the Romans, a society's ultimate evil. *Il primo re* may be said to conform, again unintentionally, to another Horatian perspective, the opposite of the one mentioned above. It appears in a few of his early works, composed during the war between Mark Antony and Octavian, the future Emperor Augustus, at a time when Horace nearly despaired

¹¹ A good starting point is the section "Scena" of *ClassicoContemporaneo* 5, 2019 (online annual). Apart from the contributions mentioned later see especially the introduction by Giuseppe Pucci: *Il primo re*. Una discussione a più voci (pp. 1–6) and Valentino Nizzo: *Il [vero?] primo Re?* (pp. 36–67).

¹² Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*. Or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill, ed. Ian Shapiro, New Haven 2010, p. 78. This paragraph has the marginal heading "The Incommodities of such a War" (i.e. "Warre of every one against every one," as the header of the preceding paragraph puts it).

of Rome's present and future. *Epode* 7 was written some time between late 39 and 36 B.C., *Epode* 16 in early 38 B.C. The first instance of a Roman fighting a Roman is, of course, the quarrel between Romulus and Remus. The ending of *Epode* 7 makes clear that Horace saw the root cause for the horrors of contemporary warfare in that fratricide: "So it is: pitiless Fate and the crime of fraternal murder have driven the Romans on since innocent Remus' blood flowed to the ground, a curse to his descendants."¹³ In *Epode* 16 Horace even exhorted the Romans to abandon the city and to start anew elsewhere, and the nadir of Rome lies in Horace's vision of a barbarian desecrating Romulus' tomb (ll. 13–14). With the establishment of the Augustan empire and its peace, Horace changed his mind, but even *Odes* 3.6 echoes his early perspective at its conclusion (ll. 45–48).

Nasty, brutish, and short: this is the kind of life in the pre-civilized tribal society that *Il primo re* puts before viewers' eyes while adhering to the now almost obligatory excesses of on-screen violence made possible by contemporary permissiveness. In this way budgetary restrictions, indicated by the absence of stars, fancy and expensive sets, and elaborate costumes, and by a small cast and extensive location filming, can all be compensated for and turned to dramatic advantage (of sorts). The result is nothing like twenty-first-century blockbusters.

Implicit in all its Hobbesian gloom is the film's claim to realism: no mythic-epic stylization as in traditional heroic cinema; instead, a demonstration of what may have been proto-historical life. Given the absence of textual, archeological, or other material kinds of documentation about the foundation of Rome, any "facts" are at best speculative deductions. Viewers familiar with modern theories of historiography may here be reminded of a famous dictum by German historian Leopold von Ranke. He characterized the historian's task as he understood it for himself as a duty to show "wie es eigentlich gewesen."¹⁴ In view of the common understanding of this phrase as "what really happened," it is worth remembering that *eigentlich* means "characteristically" or "essentially." *Il primo re* shows us something related: not *wie es eigentlich gewesen* but *wie es eigentlich gewesen sein könnte*: how it essentially might have been. Such a view of history is regularly found in cinema and in earlier fictions in word and image: drama, opera, novel, painting. Epic and related cinema may be about history, but it is not made by or for historians. It shows, to varying artistic degrees, no more than what the past might have been like. Like Corbucci, Rovere tells a story about what might have happened before the foundation of Rome. Unlike Corbucci, Rovere downplays film style and genre with the unrelenting bleakness of his portrayal of the Romans before Rome.

¹³ Hor. epod. 7.17–20. My pale prose translation does no justice to Horace's style.

¹⁴ Leopold Ranke: *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535*, vol. 1, Leipzig / Berlin 1824, p. VI (in his "Vorrede"). Ranke was not the first or only historian to formulate such a perspective.

The fact that a kind of Rankean perspective was prominent in the filmmakers' minds is evident from the most remarkable feature of *Il primo re*. This is the language the characters speak. It is not Latin but an artificially, if cleverly, constructed and supposedly accurate early version based on extensive linguistic research. In Rovere's own words:

The idea of using archaic Latin was there from the very beginning. I wanted my characters to speak a language that sounded like history, melodious and ancestral, a mother tongue, through which the audience could attune themselves with the story being told. I was very curious, and a bit concerned to see what that choice might have entailed, the reaction of the actors and the other people on set. I have to say that from the time of the auditions it was overwhelming. Something magical happened, like a spell: we were listening to ancient, mysterious sounds, that were speaking to us. We worked in close collaboration with an incredible team of semioticians from the Università La Sapienza (Rome), led by Professor Donatella Gentili. Starting from a detailed study of archaic Latin, they fleshed it out using the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European language, the common ancestor of the Indo-European languages.¹⁵

Luca Alfieri, who is listed in the film's closing credits as "linguist," summarized the matter in the abstract of an article in which he describes the process:

The paper focuses on the invention of a Proto-Latin language for the film *Il primo Re* by M. Rovere (2019). The language was created with the explicit aim of producing a barbaric and primitivistic effect on the hearer. The method used to invent it is summed up in the formula: back in time, but still in place. We started from Classical Latin and "antiquated" it[,] exploiting the data from historical Latin and Indo-European linguistics, but we avoided mixing Latin with different languages. The result is a particular type of language *ex inventione*: the single chunks that compose it are all plausible reconstructions from the scientific point of view, but they are not attested and have never co-existed as such. Language science and the human instinct for creativity (*verbigeratio ludica*) are therefore the two sources from which the language of the film was created.¹⁶

The result is clearly a labor of love on the part of the scholars who designed it, and it may well be impressive to general audiences. But it is anachronistic and thus not convincing, although the matter is handled better than was the case for the classical Latin in Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976), a story about the first Christian martyr. There it was painfully obvious that the actors did not know Latin and had been trained phonetically.¹⁷

¹⁵ Quoted from Giacomo Savani: *Omnia vincit amor?* An Interview with Matteo Rovere, Director of *Il Primo Re*, in: Classical Reception Studies Network, 29 January 2019. classical-reception.org/omnia-vincit-amor-an-interview-with-matteo-rovere-director-of-il-primo-re/ [23 August 2022]. Interviewer's questions omitted.

¹⁶ Luca Alfieri: Un caso di creatività filologica. La lingua de *Il primo re* e la ricerca applicata nell'ambito delle scienze umane, in: *FormaMente*, 14.2 (supplement), 2019, pp. 133–145. Cf. his shorter article: Alfieri: La lingua de *Il primo re*, in: *ClassicoContemporaneo* 5, 2019, pp. 7–12 (in section "Scena").

¹⁷ A suspicion that this is still the case for *Il primo re*, at least to a certain degree, persists, as when vowels in syllables are stressed that did not carry the stress in Latin and are unlikely to have carried it earlier. An example is *solí sumus* from near the film's beginning. Errors are occasionally noticeable as well: *age* ("come on!") is sometimes addressed to more than one

In contrast to the linguistic accuracy claimed for *Il primo re*, a particular plot element reveals that Rovere attempted to show something new and unexpected to viewers who already know the story of Romulus and Remus. This is the invention that Remus, not Romulus, was originally intended to rule the new city. Remus is the protagonist: he achieves more than Romulus and has more screen time, and the actor playing him received first billing in the final credits and appeared prominently on advertising posters. The film's title clearly refers to him, even if he is not the first king of Rome. Predictably and unavoidably, a necessary plot twist restores the familiar version at the end.¹⁸

Most of *Il primo re* was filmed on Italian locations: natural sites showing no trace of human existence. Nevertheless, Rovere's visual style is, cumulatively, monotonous: unrelievedly dark and oppressive, not to say depressing. If what we see is the ancestral heritage of the Rome that Rovere and his viewers are familiar with, then it remains unclear *how* or even *why* this version of the myth about the dawn of Roman history and culture should have led to what the American release title of the film promises. Virgil's words at the end of his first sentence in the *Aeneid* announced that the result of *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem* would be a great city, the culmination point of history at his time.¹⁹ By contrast, in *Il primo re* it is nearly impossible to understand how an enduring civilization could have come about from what we are watching. Rovere's soon-to-be Romans appear incapable of producing any cultural artifacts beyond some rudimentary implements, and their downright barbaric religious rites only reinforce such an impression. When asked about filmic influences on "the 'rough' and dark aesthetics" of *Il primo re*, Rovere singled out *Valhalla Rising* (2009), a medieval tale by Danish writer-director Nicolas Winding Refn, and Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* (2006), set in early sixteenth-century Mexico.²⁰ These are conscious stylistic parallels. But, additionally and unconsciously even across several decades, the atmosphere of *Il primo re* seems to be closer in spirit to two other films. One is Corbucci's *Django*, with all the dirt, mud, rain, and darkness prominent in Rovere's film. The other is Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), the bleakest orgy of sado-masochistic violence imaginable, equally dark literally and figuratively. The chief plot difference, despite their common violence, between *Django* and *The Passion of the Christ* on the one hand and, on the other, *Il primo re* is that Rovere shows what might have preceded a great civilization, while the other two showed their societies in moral decline. Corbucci's *Romolo e Remo* told pretty much the same story as *Il primo re*, but Corbucci had still been in his pre-cynical phase. Rovere apparently is too modern and too realistic for the romantic nature of the *peplum*.

(although *agite* can be heard, too); more egregious is *quis vobis?* for "which of you?"

¹⁸ Cf. Domitilla Campanile: Strutture narrative nel *Primo re*, in: *ClassicoContemporaneo* 5, 2019, pp. 28–35 (in section "Scena").

¹⁹ Verg. Aen. 1.7: *altae moenia Romae*.

²⁰ Savani: *Omnia vincit amor?* (Fn. 15).

Il primo re has led to a television series called *Romulus*, currently in its second year. The feature film showed what might have led *ad urbem condendam*: up to the foundation of Rome. The series seems to concentrate on more of the same, as a trailer for its first season reveals:

A primitive and brutal world ruled by nature and the gods, from which will rise one of the greatest and most powerful empires ever. Amid history, legend, and revolution, the epic tale of the origin of Rome [...]: ROMULUS. The series created, directed, and produced by Matteo Rovere [...] is both a grand epic fresco and a realistic reconstruction of the events that, amid history, legend, and revolution, led to the birth of Rome.²¹

Neither the film nor the series, then, shows what Rovere once said about his aim with the feature film:

I hope that *Il Primo Re* might stimulate curiosity and interest in the classical world and ancient history. I wanted a film that could entertain and at the same time talk to people. [...] If the film ends up having a positive impact in terms of education and dissemination, I would be pleased.²²

This is a laudable perspective, but, given the film's relentlessly rough and dark esthetics, it seems an unrealistic hope. And it is patently disingenuous, as the film makes evident at its end. In the final scene Romulus and his people cross the Tiber, a symbolically significant act, as viewers are meant to understand; the dead body of Remus is taken across as well. Romulus then selects a site on which to cremate his brother. Before lighting the pyre, he addresses first Remus, then the others. Rather incongruously, Romulus here delivers the film's longest and rhetorically most elevated speech, for nobody has ever been this eloquent in all of *Il primo re*. I quote the American home-video release's subtitles:

Here is our land, Remus. The destiny set out by the gods is now fulfilled. We will unite with those who no longer have anything. The people along the Tiber will be part of this alliance. But this city was born out of my pain and my brother's blood. At night, his soul will knock on your doors to remind you of the price of the future. And you, gods, dull my eyes, so they will not see what my sword has done. I wish I had died instead. May this fraternal blood that soaks our land become as hard as stone. One word shall be engraved on it and echo in the head of anyone who dares to trespass, attack, or flee to the city for refuge! Tremble with fear. It is "Rome."

When the screen fades to black, the words "753 b.C." (*sic*) and "Rome" appear in white letters in its center. Then comes a text identified as a quotation from Plutarch:

²¹ The original: "Un mondo primitivo e brutale governato dalla natura e dagli dèi, da cui sorgerà uno degli imperi più grandi e potenti di sempre. Fra storia, leggenda e rivoluzione, l'epico racconto sull'origine di Roma [...]: ROMULUS. La serie creata, diretta e prodotta da Matteo Rovere [...] è al tempo stesso un grande affresco epico e una realistica ricostruzione degli eventi che, fra storia, leggenda e rivoluzione, portarono alla nascita di Roma."

²² Quoted from Savani: *Omnia vincit amor?* (Fn. 15).

After the Foundation, Romulus gathered the errants, the poor and the assassins cast away from the other cities. He gave them courage and strength and told them they would no longer have to show mercy to anyone.

Plutarch wrote nothing of the sort. Here is what he did write in his summary comparison of Theseus and Romulus, whose lives he paired together:

For he and his brother were reputed to be slaves and sons of swineherds, and yet they not only made themselves free, but freed first almost all the Latins, enjoying at one and the same time such most honourable titles as slayers of their foes, saviours of their kindred and friends, kings of races and peoples, founders of cities; not transplanters, as Theseus was, who put together and consolidated one dwelling-place out of many, but demolished many cities bearing the names of ancient kings and heroes. Romulus, it is true, did this later, compelling his enemies to tear down and obliterate their dwellings and enrol themselves among their conquerors; but at first, not by removing or enlarging a city which already existed, but by creating one from nothing, and by acquiring for himself at once territory, country, kingdom, clans, marriages and relationships, he ruined no one and killed no one, but was a benefactor of men without homes and hearths, who wished instead to be a people and citizens of a common city. Robbers and miscreants, it is true, he did not slay, but he subdued nations in war, laid cities low, and triumphed over kings and commanders.²³

When Rovere's Romulus sees no difference between attackers and those who turn to his city for refuge, he is clearly the opposite of the Romulus who, Plutarch stated repeatedly, provided asylum for refugees.²⁴ What Romulus himself is reported to have told someone to whom he appeared after his death is different from Rovere's Romulus as well:

It was the pleasure of the gods, O Proculus, from whom I came, that I should be with mankind only a short time, and that after founding a city destined to be the greatest on earth for empire and glory, I should dwell again in heaven. So farewell, and tell the Romans that if they practise self-restraint, and add to it valour, they will reach the utmost heights of human power. And I will be your propitious deity, Quirinus.²⁵

In sum, Rovere's Romulus has very little in common with Plutarch's. And the film's presentation of religion differs considerably from how Greeks and Romans conceived of their gods. The film is devoid of all visual manifestations of the divine except for fire, which is sacred, possesses supernatural powers, and is protected by a kind of priestess, presumably a precursor of Roman Vestal Virgins. The cult of Vesta, goddess of the hearth and its fire, and the college of Vestals had their origins in Alba Longa, the city founded before Rome.²⁶ The discrepancy

²³ Plut. comp. Thes. Rom. 3; quoted from Bernadotte Perrin (trans.): *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Mass. / London 1914, p. 195.

²⁴ Plut. Rom. 6.3 (the brothers save the oppressed from violence even as young men), 9.3 (Rome as protection for all kinds of refugees), 16.4–5 (Romulus turns vanquished enemies into Roman citizens, the most important contribution to the growth of his city, according to Plutarch), and 23.5–6 (treaties with enemies).

²⁵ Plut. Rom. 28.2; quoted from Perrin: *Plutarch's Lives* (Fn. 23), p. 179.

²⁶ On this see Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price: *Religions of Rome*, vol. 1: A History, Cambridge 1998, pp. 51–59, and vol. 2: A Sourcebook, pp. 4–5 and 202–204, with quotations from ancient texts and extensive references.

between actual Roman religion and that in *Il primo re* becomes yet clearer when we consider the film's epigraph, a quotation from W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge* (1944): "A God that can be understood is no God." These words are spoken by an Eastern sage in the context of Hinduism and echo the Christian concept of the *deus* (or *Deus*) *absconditus*, the hidden god (or God). It goes back to the Old Testament (*Isaiah* 45.15) and becomes prominent in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa, Martin Luther, and others.

As a non-epic, *Il primo re* is different in style from how the cinema has traditionally presented ancient Rome. But in terms of its plot's historical implications, it is also disappointingly similar. When the end credits roll, we see what the greatness of Rome will really be like. A computerized map of central Italy identifies, partly in Italian and partly in Latin, Rome and its region, again with the date of 753 B.C. The camera recedes to show us the spread of the Roman Empire across an ever-larger map until the second century A.D., when Rome reached its greatest extent. But the dark and sepia-tinted map becomes more and more infused with red as the empire continues to expand. Not only does this color come to dominate the screen, but it is also designed in such a way as to resemble a liquid being spilled. The point is obvious: Rome progresses through waves of bloodshed. This is a visual restatement of Romulus' words at the end and the *faux* quotation from Plutarch: no mercy, all fear. And all militarism, all imperialism. This is a revival of the hoariest Hollywood cliché about Rome. It was prominent, to mention just one example, in Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953), which started the era of widescreen-and-color spectacles. Its hero, a Roman officer about to die a martyr's death for his new-found Christian faith, characterizes the course of the Roman Empire as "aggression and slavery that have brought agony and terror to the world." The flood of blood that symbolizes the spread of Rome in *Il primo re* amounts to a visual restatement. Defenders of Rovere's ending might point to Horace's vision in *Odes* 3.3 of a *ferox Roma* ("warlike Rome") and *horrenda* (sc. *Roma*: "terrifying Rome") that imposes its laws (*iura*) across the world (*in ultimas [...] oras*), but such an attempt could easily be countered by reference to *Odes* 3.4, in which Horace is clear about irresponsibly applied force (*vis consili expers*), which only brings about its own ruin because the gods support and aid power exercised with moderation but hate the power of those who apply it with evil intent.²⁷

In view of the points advanced here, we need not be surprised at the development from Corbucci's *Romolo e Remo* to Rovere's *Il primo re*. The style of Rovere's film may be as modern as anything in contemporary cinema, but its content is as traditional as anything in film history.

²⁷ The lines in question: Hor. *carm.* 3.3.44–46 and 3.4.65–70. Cf. Hor. *carm.* *saec.* 57–60 on the rewards for moderate and responsible behavior.

