

From White by Richard Dyer

4

The white man's muscles

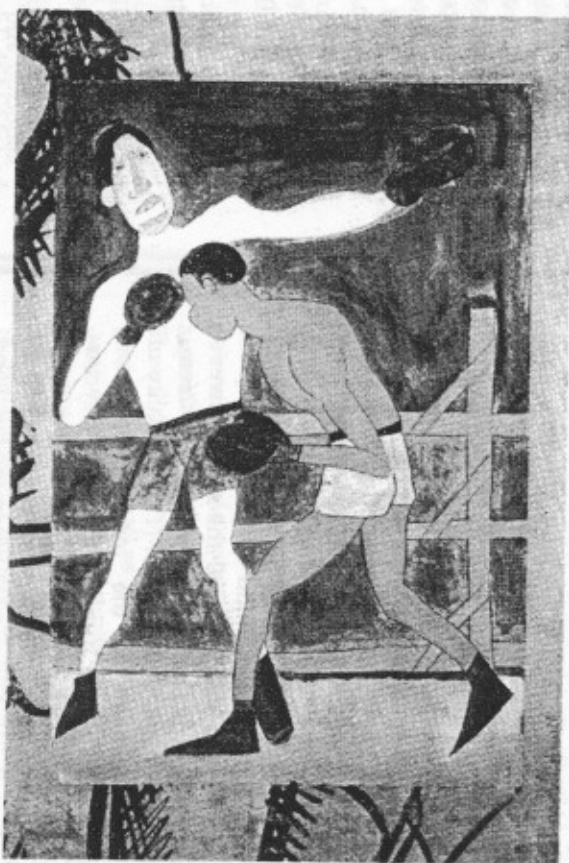


Plate 4.1 William H. Johnson *Joe Louis and Unidentified Boxer* (c.1939-42) (National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution)

Until the 1980s, it was rare to see a white man semi-naked in popular fictions. The art gallery, sports and pornography offered socially sanctioned or cordoned-off images, but the cinema, the major visual narrative form of the twentieth century, only did so in particular cases. This was not so with non-white male bodies. In the Western, the plantation drama and the jungle adventure film, the non-white body is routinely on display. Dance numbers with body-baring chorus boys (up to and including Madonna's videos) most often used non-white (including 'Latin') dancers. Paul Robeson, the first major African-American acting star (as opposed to featured player), appeared torso-naked or more for large sections in nearly all his films, on a scale unimaginable with white male stars. The latter might be glimpsed for a brief shot washing or coming out of a swimming pool or the sea (at which point they instantly put on a robe), but a star like Rudolph Valentino (in any case Latin and often cast as a non-white) or a film like *Picnic* (1955) stand out as exceptions,<sup>1</sup> together with two genres: the boxing film (not really discussed here) and the adventure film in a colonial setting with a star possessed of a champion or built body.

This latter form is found in three cycles. One is the Tarzan films, beginning in 1912 with *Tarzan of the Apes*, continuing through forty-six further features, along with two television series and several Tarzan lookalikes (e.g. *King of the Jungle* (1927 and 1933) and *Bomba the Jungle Boy* (1949-)).<sup>2</sup> A second is the series of Italian films produced between 1957 and 1965 centred on heroes drawn from classical antiquity played by US bodybuilders, a cycle that has come to be known as the peplum.<sup>3</sup> Third, since the mid-1970s, there have been vehicles for such muscle stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Claude Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren.<sup>4</sup>

The two common features of these films – a champion/built body and a colonial setting – set terms for looking at the naked white male body. The white man has been the centre of attention for many centuries of Western culture, but there is a problem about the display of his body, which gives another inflection to the general paradox, already adumbrated, of whiteness and visibility. A naked body is a vulnerable body. This is so in the most fundamental sense – the bare body has no protection from the elements – but also in a social sense. Clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class: to be without them is to lose prestige. Nakedness may also reveal the inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals. It may betray the relative similarity of male and female, white and non-white bodies, undo the remorseless insistences on difference and concomitant power carried by clothes and grooming. The exposed white male body is liable to pose the legitimacy of white male power: why should people who look like that – so unimpressive, so like others – have so much power?

At the same time, there is value in the white male body being seen. On the one hand, the body often figures very effectively as a point of final

explanation of social difference. By this argument, whites – and men – are where they are socially by virtue of biological, that is, bodily superiority. The sight of the body can be a kind of proof. On the other hand, the white insistence on spirit, on a transcendent relation to the body, has also led to a view that perhaps non-whites have better bodies, run faster, reproduce more easily, have bigger muscles, that perhaps indeed 'white men can't jump', a film title that has both a literal, basketball reference and an appropriately heterosexual, reproductive connotation. The possibility of white bodily inferiority falls heavily on the shoulders of those white men who are not at the top of the spirit pile, those for whom their body is their only capital. In the context particularly of white working-class or 'underachieving' masculinity, an assertion of the value and even superiority of the white male body has especial resonance (cf. Walkerdine 1986, Tasker 1993). The built body in colonial adventures is a formula that speaks to the need for an affirmation of the white male body without the loss of legitimacy that is always risked by its exposure, while also replaying the notion that white men are distinguished above all by their spirit and enterprise.

I will look first at the connotations of this kind of body and then at the colonial setting, before discussing the relation between them. In the final part of the chapter I look in more detail at the particular instance of the peplum, bringing the class address of colonial muscularity into focus and opening up the latter's relation to an avowedly white form of politics, fascism.

Tarzan, Hercules, Rambo<sup>5</sup> and the other heroes of the films in question here are all played by actors with champion and/or built physiques. The first Tarzans, and the stars of an earlier (c.1912–26) Italian muscle cycle, were drawn from the strong man acts of the variety stage. Thereafter, however, sports proper generally provided the performers. Of the Tarzans, James Peirce (1926) was an All-American centre on the Indiana University Football Team, and Frank Merrill (1928 and 1929) a national gym champion; Johnny Weissmuller (twelve films between 1932 and 1948) had five Olympic gold medals for swimming; Buster Crabbe (1933) was also an Olympic swimmer, Herman Brix (1935 and 1938) an Olympic shot putter, Glenn Morris (1938) an Olympic decathlon champion, Denny Miller (1960) a UCLA basketball star and Mike Henry (three films between 1967 and 1968) a star line-backer for the Los Angeles Rams. Although Lex Barker (1949–55), Jock Mahoney (1962–3) and Ron Ely (TV 1966–8) were beefy rather than sculpted, Gordon Scott (1955–60) was clearly a bodybuilder, while Miles O'Keefe (1981) and Wolf Larson (TV 1991–3) are manifest creatures of the Nautilus age. The stars of the peplum and recent muscleman films are also obviously gym products. In two notable cases they are explicitly champions of bodybuilding: Steve Reeves (the most famous peplum star) won the Mr America contest in 1947 and Mr Universe in 1950 and Arnold Schwarzenegger was seven times Mr Olympia.

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Tarzan since the 1950s, the peplum heroes and Schwarzenegger, Stallone *et al.* have bodybuilt bodies. The bodies of earlier Tarzans were winners, and hence amenable to being understood in terms of white superiority, but the heightened muscularity of the built body carries further connotations of whiteness.

Bodybuilding as an activity has a relatively good track record in terms of racial equality. From the 1950s on, non-white men – and especially those of African descent – became major figures in bodybuilding competitions.<sup>6</sup> Yet the dominant images of the built body remain white. Kenneth Dutton (1995: 232) points out that black bodybuilders are rare on the cover of *Muscle and Fitness*, the bodybuilding magazine now most responsible for establishing and promulgating the image of the sport. They feature inside, as, given their pre-eminence in the field, they must, but a cover fixes an image of the world evoked by a magazine, even for those who don't buy it – the covers of *Muscle and Fitness* tend to define built bodies as white. The treatment of non-white bodybuilders by the movies is no better. There is no king of the jungle of African descent, no really major non-white muscle stars.<sup>7</sup> The peplum used two spectacularly built black bodybuilders, Paul Wynter and Serge Nubret, the latter now one of the best known figures in bodybuilding, but they were never the heroes, only, as I discuss below, helpers or foes.<sup>8</sup>

Bodybuilding in popular culture articulates white masculinity.<sup>9</sup> The body shapes it cultivates and the way it presents them draw on a number of white traditions. First, bodybuilding makes reference to classical – that is, ancient Greek and Roman – art (cf. Doan and Dietz 1984:11–18, Wyke 1996). Props or montages often explicitly relate body shape and pose to classical antecedents (cf. Plate 4.2), as does writing about bodybuilding.<sup>10</sup> The standard posing vocabulary was elaborated at the end of the nineteenth century in conscious emanation of the classic statuary then so prized in the visual culture. Eugen Sandow, the first bodybuilding star, affirmed for himself a lineage back to the Greeks and Romans in his 1904 manual *Bodybuilding, or Man in the Making*.<sup>11</sup> By this time, the Caucasian whiteness of the classical world was taken for granted, down to the pleasure taken in the literal (hue) whiteness that its statues now have (the Victorians were scandalised to be told that Greek statues were once coloured (Jenkyns 1980: 146–54)). Second, bodybuilding now more often invokes a US, and a *fortiori* Californian, life style, with a characteristic emphasis on ideas of health, energy and naturalness. Dutton (1995: 17) locates bodybuilding's US-ness in its concatenation of labour and leisure, pain and consumerism:

The combination of an affluent consumer society and the Protestant work ethic has been reflected in activities which paradoxically combine disciplined asceticism on the one hand and narcissistic hedonism on the other.

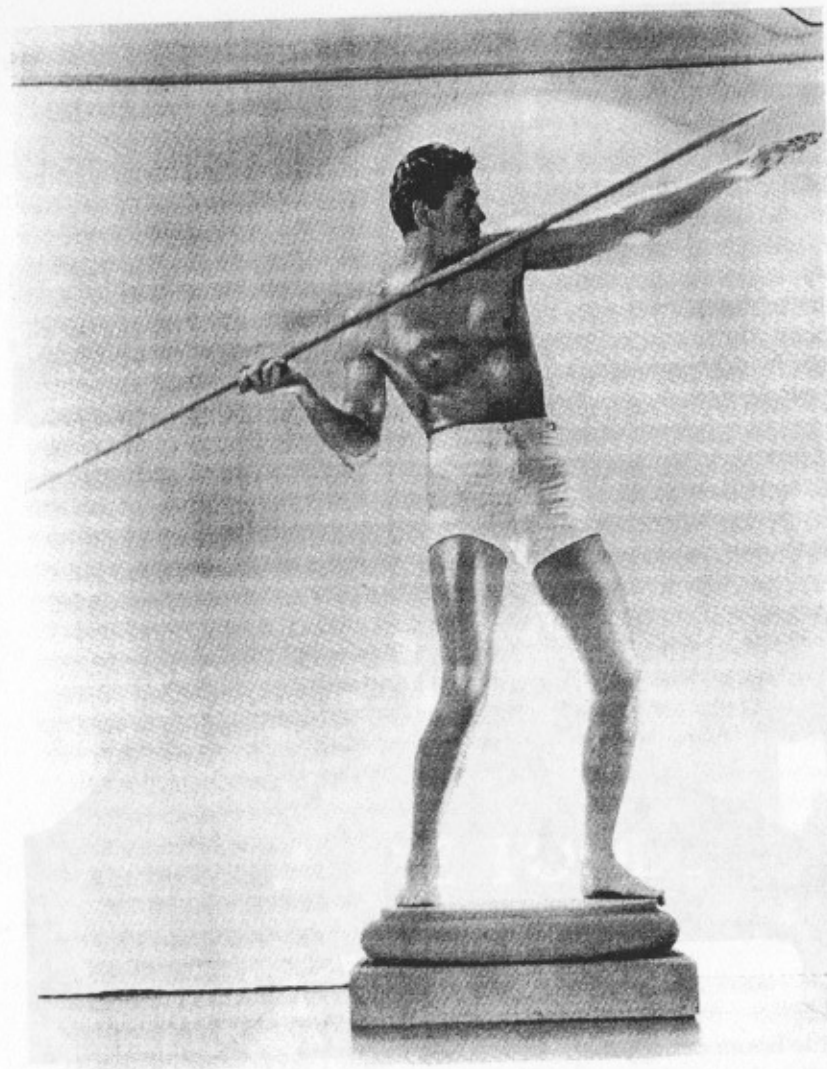


Plate 4.2 Johnny Weissmuller, 1930s (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

The USA is of course a highly multiracial society, but the idea of being an 'American' has long sat uneasily with ideas of being any other colour than white. Third, bodybuilding has sometimes adopted the image of the barbarian, drawn principally from comic books. Schwarzenegger's earliest vehicles were *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Conan the Destroyer* (1984), and there is a host of largely straight-to-video movies based on this theme, including *The Barbarians* (1987) starring the Paul brothers (Plate 4.3),

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who called themselves the Barbarians for their bodybuilding performances. The primitivism and exoticism of this – to say nothing of the fact that ‘the barbarians’ are generally credited with the destruction of classical civilisation – might suggest that this is a rather non-white image. However, not only is the casting (and in the comics the drawing) of the hero always white, it very often mobilises a sub-Nietzschean rhetoric of the Übermensch<sup>12</sup> that, however inaccurately, is strongly associated with Hitlerism and crypto-fascism. Finally, bodybuilding does also sometimes draw on Christian imagery. The activity itself involves pain, bodily suffering, and with it the idea of the value of pain. This may be echoed in film in images of bodybuilders crucified. Leon Hunt has discussed the importance of crucifixion scenes in epic films, combining as they do ‘passivity offset by control, humiliation offset by nobility of sacrifice, eroticism offset by religious connotations of transcendence’ (1993: 73). Though infrequent, the recourse to crucifixion can be a key moment in establishing the moral superiority of not specifically Christian characters: Conan in *Conan the Barbarian*, Rambo in *Rambo II* (1985) (Plates 4.4 and 4.5).

Classicism, Californianism, barbarianism and crucifixionism are specific, strongly white representational traditions. Equally, many of the formal properties of the built body carry connotations of whiteness: it is ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned.



Plate 4.3 *The Barbarians* (USA 1987): David and Peter Paul (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

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The built body presents itself not as typical but as ideal. It suggests our vague notions of the Greek gods and the Übermensch. Organised as competition, bodybuilding encourages discussion of the best body. Kenneth Dutton's study of the tradition roots it in a characteristically Western investment in perfectibility, in the possibility of humans developing themselves here on earth. In *Pumping Iron* (1976), Schwarzenegger describes bodybuilding as ‘the dream of physical perfection and the agonies you go through to attain it’. Whiteness, as I argued in Chapter 1, is an aspirational

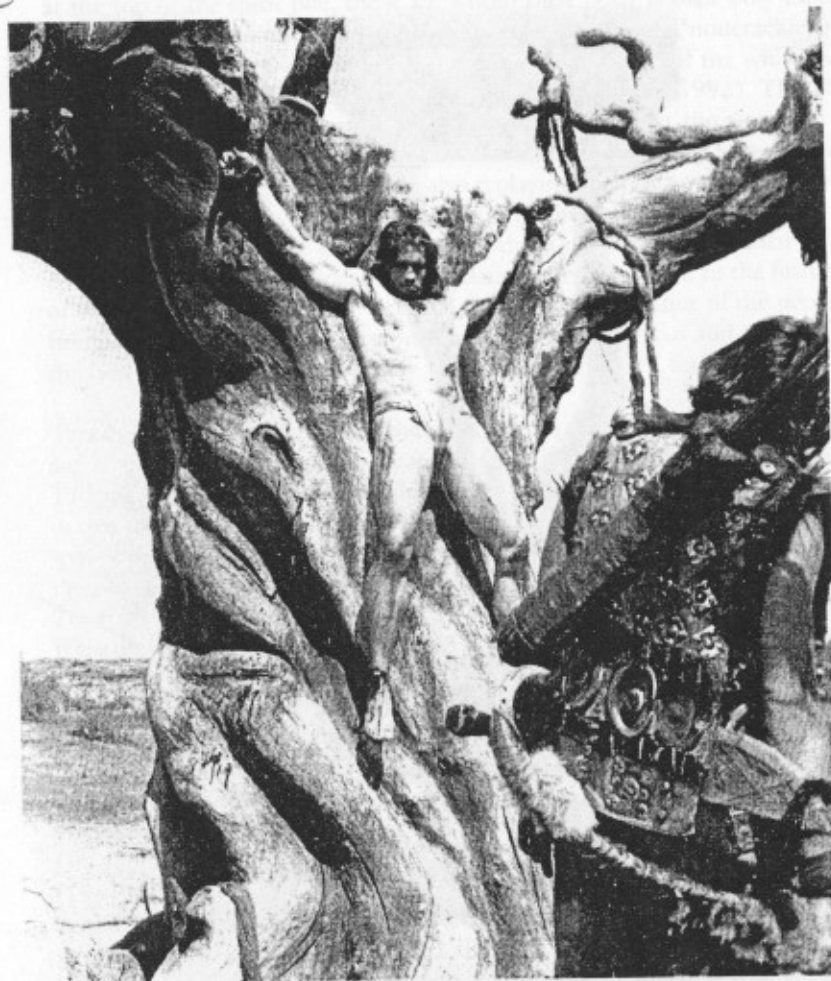


Plate 4.4 *Conan the Barbarian* (USA 1982): Arnold Schwarzenegger (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)



Plate 4.5 *Rambo: First Blood II* (USA 1985): Sylvester Stallone (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

structure, requiring ideals of human development. All the rhetoric of bodybuilding is founded on this and most vividly seen in the aspirational motifs of the posing vocabulary, bodies forever striving upwards (Plate 4.6).

The built body is hard and contoured, often resembling armour. Bodybuilding has three goals: mass (muscle size), definition (the clarity with which one muscle group stands out from another) and proportion (the visual balance between all the body's muscle groups). The first two of these present a look of hardness: the skin stretched over pumped up muscle creates a taut surface, the separation of groups seems, as bodybuilding jargon has it, to 'cut' into the body as into stone. Definition and proportion also emphasise contour, of individual muscle groups and of the body as a whole. Posing conventions, maximising size, tightening for definition, relating muscle groups to one another, further highlight these qualities; the use of oil (or often in films water or sweat) on the body emphasises it as a surface and hence its shape; relatively hard, three-quarter angle lighting brings out muscle shape; posing against cycloramas or shooting against skylines (Plate 4.7) presents the overall body contour.

Looking like a statue again invokes the classical; men against the horizon are a cliché of aspirational propaganda. Moreover, a hard, contoured body does not look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies. A sense of separation and boundedness is important to the white male ego. Klaus

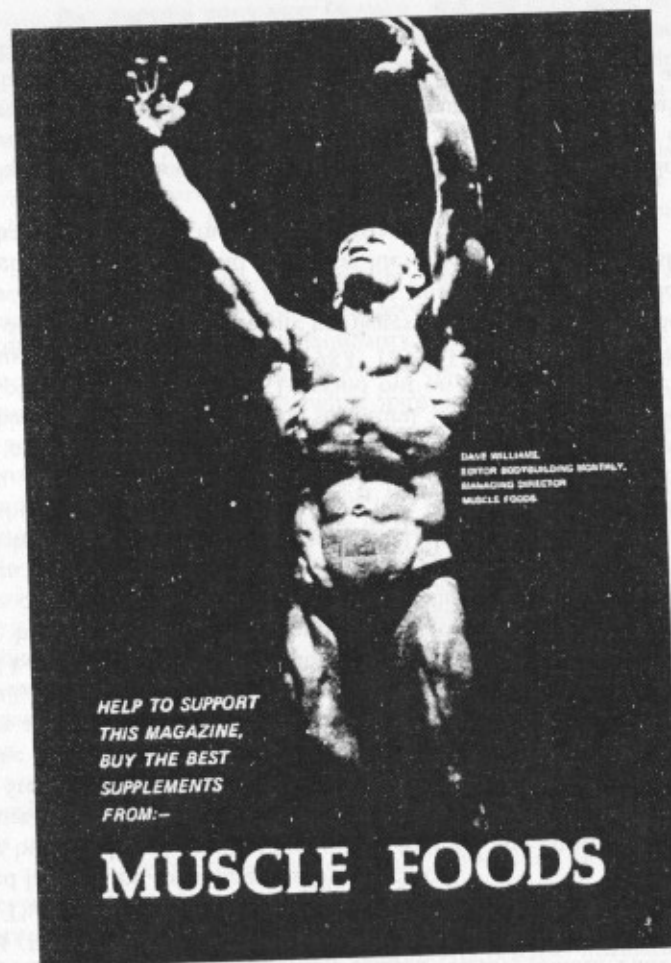


Plate 4.6 Dave Williams in advertisement for Muscle Foods, 1980s

Theweleit's study (1987) of the German Freikorps suggests a model of white male identity in which anxieties about the integrity and survival of the self are expressed through fantasmic fears of the flooding, invading character of women, the masses and racial inferiors. Only a hard, visibly bounded body can resist being submerged into the horror of femininity and non-whiteness.

The built body is an achieved body, worked at, planned, suffered for. A massive, sculpted physique requires forethought and long-term organisation; regimes of graduated exercise, diet and scheduled rest need to be worked out and strictly adhered to; in short, building bodies is the most literal triumph of mind over matter, imagination over flesh. Some pepla (e.g. *La*

*schlavia di Roma, La guerra di Troia, La battaglia di Maratona*),<sup>13</sup> and many contemporary muscleman films, include sequences showing such disciplined physical preparation. They are especially common in Stallone's films, notably *Rocky IV* (1985), which intercuts Rocky's down-home, improvisatory training routines with his Soviet opponent's hi-tech, body-as-machine processes. Schwarzenegger's films contain nothing so agonised, and he has been cast as a machine in the *Terminator* films (1984 and 1991) rather than as a machine's opponent. Schwarzenegger, as a multiple Mr Olympia winner, is always already a champion physique; Stallone's body is not so certified, his narratives involve him in proving himself physically. Schwarzenegger's body is simply massive, his characteristic facial expression genial, his persona one of Teutonic confidence; Stallone's muscles look tortured into existence, with veins popping out and strained skin, his eyes and mouth express vulnerability, iconic images have him bruised (*Rocky*) (colour Plate 12) or scarred (*Rambo*).<sup>14</sup> Schwarzenegger and Stallone are variations on achievement. Their bodies, like those of all muscle heroes, carry the signs of hard, planned labour, the spirit reigning over the flesh.

The built body is a wealthy body. It is well fed and enormous amounts of leisure time have been devoted to it. The huge, firm muscles of Gordon Scott, Steve Reeves or Arnold Schwarzenegger make the simplest contrast with the thin or slack bodies of the native peoples in their films. Such muscles are a product and sign of affluence.

Finally, bodybuilders have hairless (shaved when not naturally so) and tanned bodies. Both of these are done in order to display the muscles more clearly, but they have further connotations. Body hair is animalistic; hairlessness connotes striving above nature. The climax of *Gli amori di Ercole* has Hercules fighting a giant ape, who has previously behaved in a King Kong-ish way towards Hercules's beloved Dejanira, stroking her hair and when she screams making as if to rape her; close-ups contrast Hercules's smooth, hairless muscles with the hairy limbs of this racist archetype.<sup>15</sup>

The modern bodybuilder tans. Although Sandow used white powder to make his body look more Greek sculptural, contemporary bodybuilding guru Robert Kennedy advises: 'To stand out on stage at a physique event, one must be really well tanned' (1983: 139). Tanning, which only white people do, connotes typically white privileges: leisure (having the time to lie about acquiring a tan), wealth (buying that time, acquiring an artificial tan or travelling to the sun) and a healthy life style (the California/Australia myth that no amount of melanoma statistics seem to dim).

These bodies with their white connotations are on display in colonialist adventure films. Few are about the settlement in and maintenance of rule over foreign lands. Yet the heroes are also not usually indigenous inhabitants of the land in which the action takes place. They relate to it as a post-colonial.

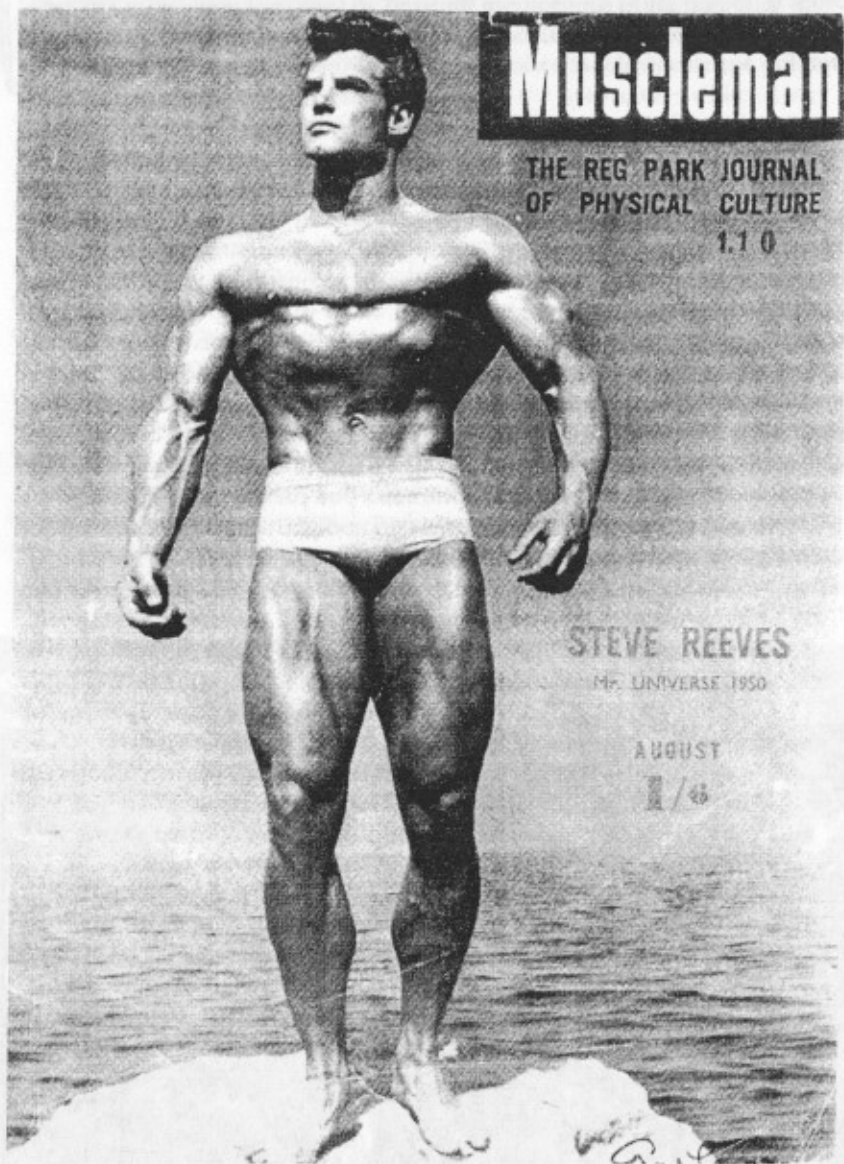


Plate 4.7 Steve Reeves, cover of *Muscleman* (c.1950; photo dated 1947)

Muscle heroes are not indigenous. Tarzan, though he lives in the jungle, is not of the jungle. The peplum heroes, initially located in ancient Greece or Rome, soon roamed very far and wide in time and space. The widespread use of a widely recognised 'Vietnam' iconography (lush, glistening, dense jungle, camouflage gear, hi-tech hand weaponry, napalm-style fire) (Plate 4.8)<sup>16</sup> in 1980s muscle films (e.g. *Commando* (1985) and *Predator* (1987), both with Schwarzenegger, Stallone's Rambo films, Chuck Norris's work,<sup>17</sup> the *American Ninja* series 1985– with Michael Dudikoff, *Sword of Bushida* (1990) with Richard Norton, *Men of War* (1994) with Dolph Lundgren) invokes the most vividly remembered fighting in a foreign land of recent Western history. This invocation, associating the muscle image with the Vietnam experience, is carried over into other contemporary muscle films.

In all cases, the hero is up against foreignness, its treacherous terrain and inhabitants, animal and human. The latter are quite often his adversaries, but by no means always. There are good and bad, instinctual and wily, stupid and wise, primitive and orientalist natives, in any combination. The colonialist structure of the heroes' relation to the native is aid as much as antagonism: he sorts out the problems of people who cannot sort things out for themselves. This is the role in which the Western nations liked to cast themselves in relation to their former colonies. The claim that had always



Plate 4.8 *Predator* (USA 1987): Arnold Schwarzenegger, Elpidia Carrillo, Carl Weathers and Bill Duke (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

been made, that imperial possession brought, and was even done in order to bring, benefits to the natives, informed policy since the 1950s, headed by the idea of the USA as world policeman, sharpened by cold war rivalry over political/economic influence. Aid is the watchword alike of foreign policy towards the Third World and the muscleman hero.

The three groups of films offer markedly different variations on this. I will look briefly here at Tarzan and Rambo *et al.*, leaving discussion of the peplum's probably rather less familiar colonialism to the final section of the chapter.

The Tarzan films are clearly rooted in colonialism, but with a twist. Very many involve a journey of white people from without into Africa. The difficulty of the terrain, its unfamiliarity and its dangers (savage beasts, precipitous mountain passes, tumultuous rivers, thick jungle) provide the opportunity for the exercise of the white spirit, indomitable, organised. The native people may have some specialised knowledge useful to the whites, but otherwise are either serviceable to carry things or else one more aspect of the land's perils. All this is the familiar basis for the thrills of the jungle adventure story. But Tarzan is already in the jungle. Apart from the Elmo Lincoln films and *Greystoke, the Legend of Tarzan* (1984), which tell the story of how he comes to be there (born of Scottish parents who die soon after), it is simply a given that Tarzan lives in the jungle. Sometimes he helps the whites, but very often he defends the jungle against them, for they have come to find treasure or, most often, despoil nature (for example, killing elephants for tusks, capturing animals who are Tarzan's helpers). Politically, Tarzan is a green.<sup>18</sup> Not infrequently, he defends native people against whites whose actions would destroy their way of life.

Tarzan, then, is identified with the jungle. He is at one with the animals. In his unadorned near-nakedness, he is natural man. Some of the comic strips, and the Weissmuller films especially, show him merging with the shapes and shadows of the jungle (Plates 4.9 and 4.10). Yet he is also superior to nature, he is king of the jungle. Just as elephants and chimpanzees come to the rescue at his call, or even because they sense instinctually that he is in peril, so too are lions and crocodiles swiftly despatched at his hands. Likewise, he is a friend to good natives (though never going so far as to live with them), but an invincible enemy of the bad, and in either case, he is physically, mentally and morally their superior.

The theme of nature, Tarzan's greenness, is not a mere mask for this colonialist relation. The treatment of nature is a central aspect of colonial enterprise. The latter is understood to involve mastery and ordering, but also a depredation that distances the white man from nature. A lament for a loss of closeness to nature has run through a very great deal of white culture. With Tarzan, however, one can have colonial power and closeness to nature. Tarzan is indubitably white – even those who do not know the story of his Scottish aristocratic parentage and the notion of heredity so important in the





Plate 4.9 Allen Saint-John: Tarzan illustration, c.1920s

novels (cf. Newsinger 1986, Bristow 1991: 213–18) will register his whiteness in the films in his sports- or gym-created body, its contrast to the other, darker native male bodies and, very often, the unabashed reference to him as a 'white ape'. Yet this white man is more in harmony with nature than the indigenous inhabitants. With Tarzan, the white man can be king of the jungle without loss of oneness with it.

Tarzan films effect an imaginary reconciliation between the enjoyment of colonial power and the ecological price of colonialism. The Rambo films do something similar, only more tortuously. As Yvonne Tasker has pointed out (1993: 98ff.), the films themselves are greatly at variance to the wider image



Plate 4.10 Johnny Weissmuller, 1930s (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

of Rambo as a straightforward gung ho American patriot. Rather, he is a patriot without, it seems, a country. The first film has him returning, much decorated, from Vietnam, to find himself rejected as an uncouth troublemaker. The film is set in the US North West, but as Rambo is pursued into the forest it begins to look as if it is Vietnam. Rambo wins against the enemies in this foreign land – but it is his home country. In the first sequel, he rescues soldiers missing in action in Vietnam after the war, actions revealed to be against actual (as opposed to declared) policy; the actions of the military bureaucracy not only seek to undermine his success but put Rambo himself at risk. He is a product of their finest training yet is none the less expendable. In *Rambo III* he is a one-man intervention in the Soviet

occupation of Afghanistan, doing the job (of destroying the arch enemy of US ideals, communism) that the US government should be doing. Thus he repeatedly upholds basic American values against the actuality of America.

Equally significant as this structural pattern is the way he dresses and fights. His spirit is evident in both his resourcefulness, that is, the intelligent, improvisatory use of his environment, and his endurance, his capacity to withstand pain and torture. Rambo's actions, as well as Stallone's tortured muscles, both express this. Yet the resourcefulness also involves him in adopting non-white techniques. Like Tarzan, he becomes more absorbed into nature than the locals, most memorably in *Rambo II*, where he sinks himself deep into a mud bank, only his eyes visible, before rearing out to kill one of the US marines set on his trail. His fighting attire includes a ritualistically donned headband, suggesting his half-Native American parentage, while his weapons of choice include a huge serrated knife and a powered bow and arrow (Plate 4.11). The latter also invoke Native Americans, though in hi-tech versions. Rambo repeatedly and explicitly espouses a love of America, yet he dresses and fights for America by going generically native (that is, conflating Native American with, in the second and third films, the know-how of good Orientals). 'America' can only be redeemed through bypassing the historical reality of the white USA, by returning to what can be conceptualised as coming before and without the USA. The Rambo films



Plate 4.11 *Rambo: First Blood II* (USA 1985): Sylvester Stallone (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

leave off at the impossibility of redemption by such contradictory means, ending with Rambo in tears (*First Blood*), Rambo walking off into a barren landscape (*Rambo II*), Rambo driving off screen, leaving the camera to dwell on the people he has saved (*Rambo III*).

The Rambo films have qualms, to a degree rare, I think, in other 1980s and 1990s muscle films. In other of the Vietnam iconography films, the misgivings, let alone the impossible knot of contradictions in loving a country that doesn't exist, are not present, although the theme of being at once emotionally central – male, white, heterosexual, powerful – and yet betrayed by bureaucrats and politicians is still very much in evidence.

Tarzan, Hercules, Rambo and the rest show us ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned white male bodies set in a colonialist relation, of aid as much as antagonism, to lands and peoples that are other to them. This body in this setting constructs the white man as physically superior, yet also an everyman, built to do the job of colonial world improvement.

The body is distinguished from those around it: hard not slack, well-fed not emaciated, cut not indulgently fat, aspirationally posed not curved over or hanging back. It does sometimes happen that the built white hero is pitted

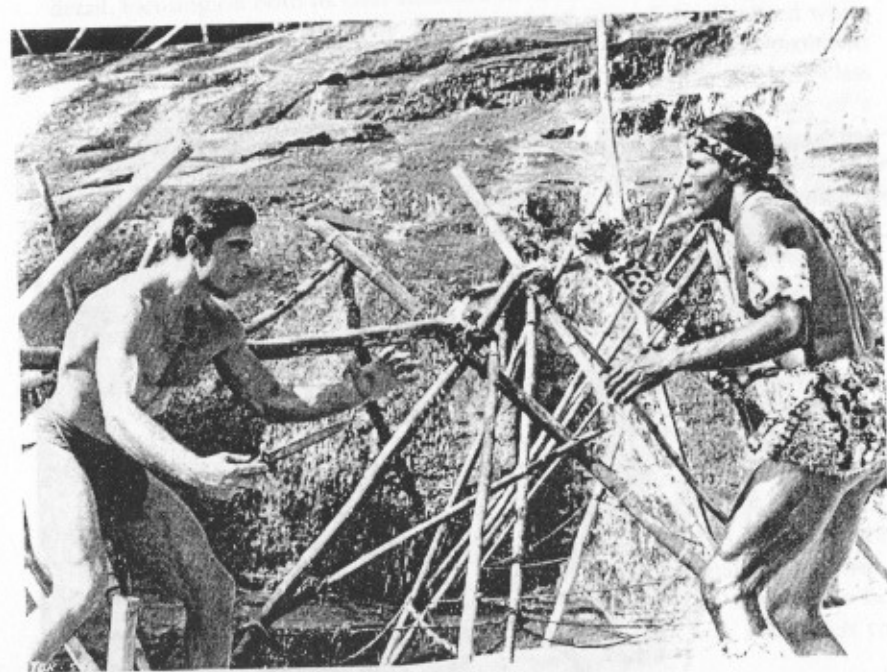


Plate 4.12 *Tarzan and the Great River* (USA 1967): Mike Henry and Rafer Johnson (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

against a built non-white body, but, since the former invariably wins, this only affirms the ultimate superiority of the white man's body. At the climax of *Tarzan and the Great River* (1967), Tarzan (Mike Henry) fights Barcuna (Rafer Johnson), the black leader who wants to control the country's main water supply (a key issue in the politics of development) (Plate 4.12). Johnson has a fine physique, but less cut, less evidently worked at, than Henry's. In cross-cutting, the latter is shot from below, Johnson from above, a standard aggrandising/diminishing rhetoric. Tarzan/Henry wears a tailored loincloth (and is earlier seen in a Western suit), whereas Barcuna/Johnson wears a leopard skin and mumbo-jumbo adornments. In other words, not only does the outcome of the confrontation prove Tarzan's bodily superiority, but casting, shooting and dress bespeak it throughout. The same contrast of attire is often found in the peplum. In *Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi*, Maciste (Gordon Mitchell) wears a cloth peplum (suggesting in fabric as well as tailoring an advanced level of human development), as compared to his unnamed black adversary (Paul Wynter), who wears a leopard skin loincloth (attire based on a primitive level of development, hunted not manufactured, draped not tailored). In this case, the adversary, Wynter, a Mr Universe, has a finer physique than the hero, but attire and defeat undercut it.

The hero's body is superior, but his skin colour – tanned white – also signals him an everyman. As discussed in Chapter 2, tanning does not suggest a desire or readiness to be racially black – a tanned white body is always indubitably just that. At the same time, it also implies that white people are capable of attractive variation in colour, whereas blacks who lighten and otherwise whiten their appearance are mocked for the endeavour and are generally held to have failed. The tanned built body affirms whiteness as a particular yet not a restricted identity, something heightened by comparison with the other bodies in the films. Tarzan is lighter than the natives, but darker than other white men; on two book covers by the same artist (colour Plates 13 and 14), he has lighter skin when battling an ape, darker when coming upon a white woman, flexible within these extremes of male darkness and female lightness. The peplum, which does not so often have non-white characters, none the less plays on skin colour. The hero is always darker than all white women, whether they be good (and blonde) or bad (and brunette), a fact encapsulated in the common pose of the woman's white hand resting against the broad expanse of the hero's tanned pectorals (Plate 4.13). He is also darker than other white men, especially bad ones, orientalist rulers whose pasty complexions are of a piece with their decadence, primitives whose underground or cave dwellings have kept their skins from sunlight. The hero, so often first seen standing in the sun against the horizon or even, as in *Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi*, apparently born in a ray of sunshine, is the antithesis of this whiteness that shrinks from the life-giving sun. Even good white men are seldom as dark as the hero. Yet the



Plate 4.13 *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (Italy/France 1958): Steve Reeves and Sylvia Koscina (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

hero is never equated with racial blackness: when even good, and physically spectacular, black men are present, the films are at great pains to stress the hero's superiority to them. White male heroism is thus constructed as both unmistakably yet not particularistically white. The muscle hero is an everyman: his tan bespeaks his right to intervene anywhere.

The emphasis in the peplum on the spectacle of the body also represents masculinity and colonialism in terms of relations between bodies. The economic, military and technological realities of colonialism disappear in a presentation of white bodily superiority as explanation of the colonising position. At its simplest this becomes the resolution of colonial conflict as a one-to-one fight between the hero and an antagonist, be the latter the leading warrior of the society, its ruler or a usurper (three versions of embodied power). Whatever the narrative specifics, the hero's better body wins out over the inferior oriental or primitive one. The example given above from *Tarzan and the Great River*, or Arnie's final stripped to the waist confrontation at the climax of *Commando*, reduce the political struggle over, respectively, natural resources or US foreign policy to a contest of bare flesh and may the best body win.

This pattern is often heightened by pitting the hero's body against the

technology of his antagonists. It is they, the object of the hero's colonialist sorting out, who have recourse to elaborate weaponry and massed militia, which the hero confronts with his bare body alone. An especially vivid image of this is the climax of *La battaglia di Maratona*, where Philippides (Steve Reeves) wears only a white loincloth as compared to the heavy armour of his opponents and where he has only his body to set against their elaborate machineries of war (Plate 4.14). Yet his built white body triumphs over their black-clad, technologically sophisticated ones. The colonial encounter, and white supremacy, is thus naturalised by being realised and achieved in the body.

The built white body is not the body that white men are born with; it is the body made possible by their natural mental superiority. The point after all is that it is built, a product of the application of thought and planning, an achievement. It is the sense of the mind at work behind the production of this body that most defines its whiteness. This makes the white man better able to handle his body, to improvise with what is to hand, to size up situations; no matter how splendid the physiques of non-

The white man's muscles  
white bodybuilders, they are never granted this quality (and thus the fact that their bodies too were produced ones is forgotten). The hero's physique may be fabulous, but what made it, and makes it effective, is the spirit within.

In short, the built body and the imperial enterprise are analogous. The built body sees the body as submitted to and glorified by the planning and ambition of the mind; colonial worlds are likewise represented as inchoate terrain needing the skill, sense and vision of the coloniser to be brought to order. The muscle hero has landscaped his body with muscles and he controls them superbly and sagely; the lands of the muscle film are enfeebled or raw bodies requiring discipline. The built white male body and colonial enterprise act as mirrors of each other, and both, even as they display the white man's magnificent corporeality, tell of the spirit within.

### The peplum

I end this chapter by exploring the 1957–65 Italian peplum cycle in more detail, focusing on both its class address and its relation to an explicit politics of whiteness: fascism. The cycle draws on the image of the idealised white man, with his spirit-perfected body and capacity to sort out the problems of lesser beings, in a context of a damaged identity: Italian working-class masculinity at a moment of rapid industrialisation and in the wake of a period of nationalist, incipiently imperialist and racist politics, fascism, that had promised working-class men so much. The whole cycle mobilises the white resonances of the body image and the colonialist narrative structures discussed above to negotiate positions for this class audience in this historical moment. The films evidently address anxieties of class and gender, but they do this with recourse, in part, to rhetorics of whiteness. This manoeuvre is complicated by the often explicit rejection of fascism as a politics; in other words, the films have to mobilise whiteness as a balm to a damaged male class identity while also dissociating themselves from a discredited politics of whiteness.

Peplum films are adventure films centred on heroes drawn from classical (including Biblical) antiquity played by US bodybuilders. As characters played by these performers they embody the white past and future: classical antiquity was still unchallenged as racially white and Europeans tend to see the USA as basically a white nation with colourful marginalia. Moreover, classical antiquity, a material presence in Italy, was still also assumed to be the pinnacle of all human achievement, while the USA was widely felt to be the land of the human future.

Most of the peplum heroes figure in ancient texts (Hercules, Spartacus, Ulysses, Samson, Goliath (as hero not villain)), but two of the most

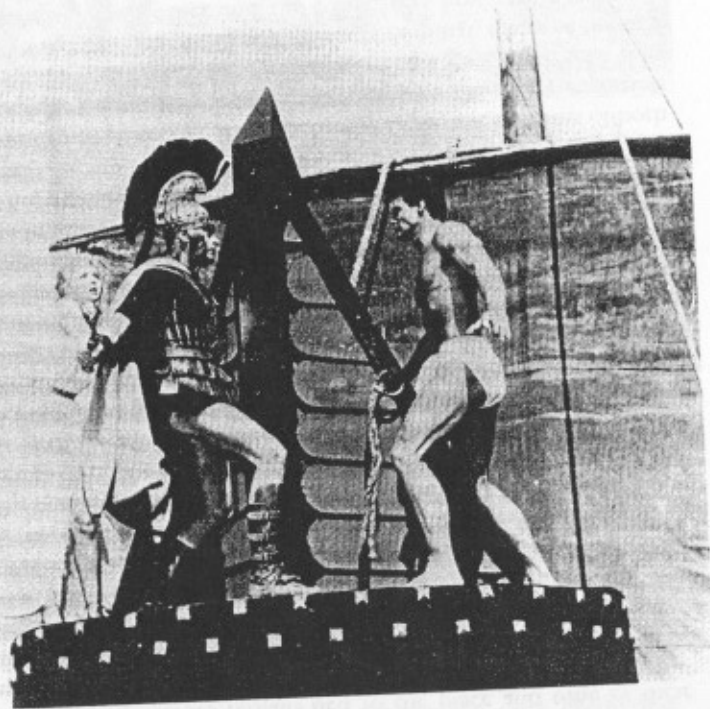


Plate 4.14 *La battaglia di Maratona* (Italy/France 1959): Mylene Demongeot, Sergio Fantoni and Steve Reeves

important are modern inventions: Ursus, from the novel and thus the films of *Quo Vadis?*, and, most widely used of all, Maciste, created for *Cabiria* in 1914. None of these heroes remain tied to the place and time of their first appearance: Hercules, Maciste and the rest appear in numerous other situations, far removed from their original stories. The whole of the ancient world was drawn upon; new fantasy lands were invented; even the post-classical world was not out of the question, Maciste showing up, for instance, in thirteenth-century Asia (*Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*), in seventeenth-century Scotland (*Maciste all'inferno*), in China (*Maciste contro i Mongoli*), Arabia (*Maciste contro lo sceicco*) and Russia (*Maciste alla corte dello Zar*) as well as in non-European ancient worlds, for example, Africa (*Maciste nelle miniere del re Salomone*) and Central America (*Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*). Such is the freedom of construction in the cycle that the heroes, originally grounded in different eras and textual traditions (legend, history, romance), can be brought together as comrades (*Ercole, Sansone, Maciste ed Ursus gli invincibili*) or antagonists (*Ulisse contro Ercole, Ercole sfida Sansone*). The co-ordinates of space and time get looser still when one recognises sets and costumes that are prehistoric in one film show up in Roman times in another, or when one sees the films in English-dubbed versions, where distributors often randomly substituted the heroes' names for one another.

This exuberant spirit of collage is undoubtedly explicable in terms of both production and consumption patterns. Although some films were expensive by Italian standards, many more were not. Sets tend to look like sets, they and the costumes were reused, rehearsal time was minimal, many of the cast could not understand each other and the voices one hears are not always those of the people one sees (even in the original versions). They were seldom shown in first-run houses (Della Casa 1989: 91); their principal destinations were inner city and rural cinemas and touring film shows, where they were watched, as Christopher Wagstaff (1992) has argued of such *terza visione* exhibition in general, more as television is watched, people dropping in and out of the cinema, moving seats, socialising. The films drew upon popular traditions of the strongman acts in piazzas, circuses, fairs and varietà that were still familiar to this audience (Farassino and Sanguineti 1983). Such conditions of production and consumption do not encourage the kind of finished, developmental forms of 'classical Hollywood cinema', with its premium on coherence of plot, plausibility of character and setting, consistency of tone. Rather what can be done and what works are set pieces of action and display, immediately and vividly recognisable characters and settings, and the principle of variety: feats, dances, playlets, slapstick, speeches, tableaux.

This makes a certain kind of cinema possible. I am not thinking here of the kind of abandonment of reason (plausibility, decorum) that the surrealists so much valued in popular cinema and which informs the early French critical

championing of the genre, so much as certain textual consequences relevant to the question of white masculinity.

Given the hero performers' ignorance (in the main) of Italian, their inexperience as actors and their limited availability, it was clearly often easier to keep them out of filming that involved interaction with others. Thus Philippides in *La battaglia di Maratona* does not join in the land battle half-way through but climbs a hill to throw boulders down on the enemy; Hercules at the liberation of Thebes in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* is occupied with wrestling a tiger in a pit rather than joining with the other men sacking the city; the climax of *Maciste contro i mostri* consists of a fight between two tribal chiefs with Maciste looking on; the second half of *Le fatiche di Ercole* is devoted to Jason and the Golden Fleece, Hercules going along as indispensable helper but Jason's quest being the one that propels the narrative. The hero is kept to one side of the narrative, whether its detailed unfolding through editing or its larger segmental organisation.

Such narrational devices permit the set pieces of posing that follow on from casting bodybuilders. The latter are not necessarily agile or acrobatic; the point is their size and shape, frozen in moments of maximum tension. Holding a boulder aloft (Plate 4.15), in a clinch with a lion, these and many other set-ups incorporate not only the posing vocabulary of bodybuilding competitions but also the *mise-en-scènes* of such non-narrative forms as physique photography and the strongman acts. The peplum's collage structure showcases the built body and the white values it carries.

Moreover, keeping the hero to one side of the narrative chain is of a piece with the ambiguity of his ontological status. Is the peplum hero human? Hercules is explicitly and traditionally not entirely so – he is half-god, half-human, a status explored in some films (*Le fatiche di Ercole, Ercole e la regina di Lidia, Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*); Maciste, a slave in the original *Cabiria*, announces that his parents were the sun and the moon in *Maciste contro i mostri*; Crios in *Arrivano i Titani* is a Titan, a demigod. Even when nothing as explicit is suggested, many of the heroes seem not quite human, not least in their capacity to leap time and space to be where they are needed, a capacity that is never explained (Maciste's sudden loin-clothed appearance at a Scottish witch burning in *Maciste all'inferno* is the most glorious example). Their introduction into the film often has a magical quality. Frequently the hero is discovered by water – the sea, a waterfall – as if born of it. In *Le fatiche di Ercole* Hercules asks to be deprived of his immortality and the granting of this is symbolised in his being drenched in rain, reborn in water as human (Plate 4.16). The first shot of the hero in *Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi* has him lying on a stone by the sea in a beam of light, in a pose echoing the Adam of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel (an image less foreign to anyone who had been through the Italian school system than it might be to others). Such imagery is of course Christian (and white) – baptismal water, Genesis. It insists on the heroes' humanity,

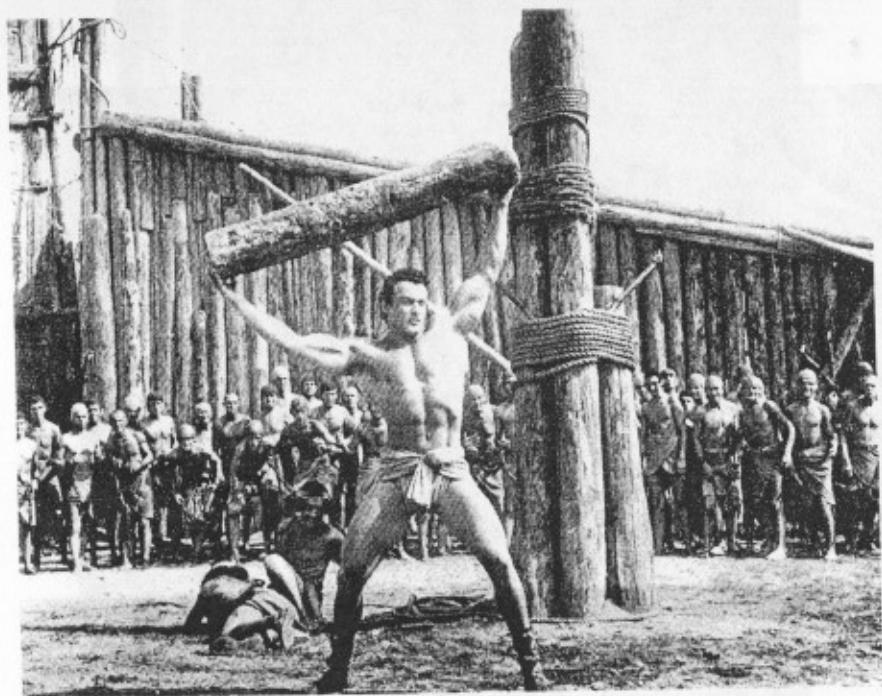


Plate 4.15 *Maciste nella valle dei re* (Italy/France/Yugoslavia 1959): Mark Forrest (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

yet their divine associations, their freedom of movement across time and space, the way they are not fully implicated in the investments of the narrative, also make them superhuman. They are both of humanity and above it, the white man's favourite position.

Such showcasing of male physical strength assumes a particular significance in the culture of the films' original audiences. The strongman image was rooted, as Giuseppe Valperga (1983) shows, in the cultural traditions of rural Italy. In addition to its popularity in entertainments and popular novels, it also had religious and local significance. Veneration and invocation of saints is an important element in Catholic devotion, and in peasant communities there was a special fondness for St Christopher, the giant who in legend carried Christ on his shoulders. Equally, big strong men were important figures in peasant communities: giant boy babies were a source of wide interest, seen as a blessing, not least because their strength was of the greatest economic significance in rural labour. In this context big male bodies were a resource of the first importance and what they could do often suggested props for strongman acts: boulders, tree trunks, carts, chains and so on.

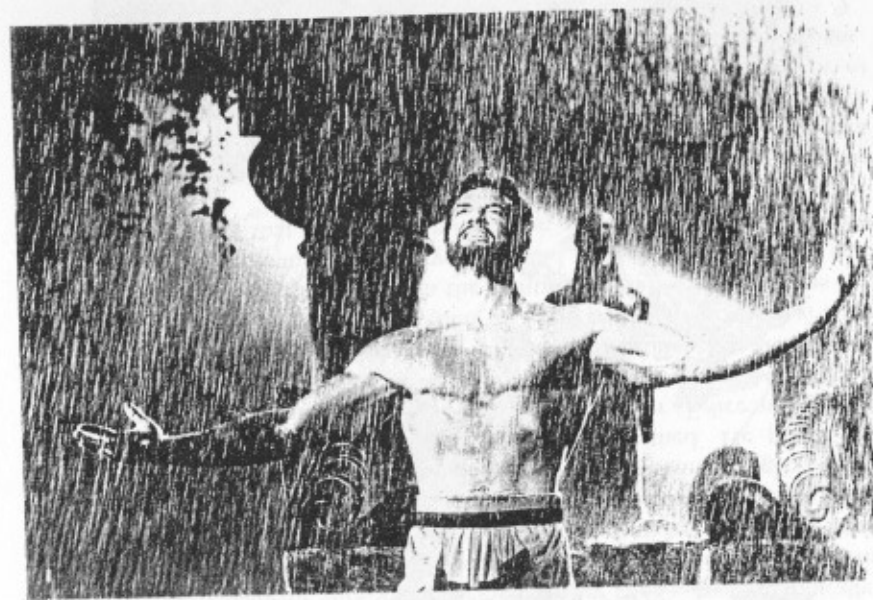


Plate 4.16 *Le fatiche di Ercole* (Italy 1957): Steve Reeves (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

However, the period of the peplum is also a period of mass internal migration in Italy, from the rural South to the industrial North, from labour based on strength to one based on skill with machines (or, failing that, shitwork). In the shift away from rural labour, the value of the big strong body, and the male power that went along with it, was undermined. The peplum celebrates a type of male body for an audience to whom it had until now been a source of economic self-worth. The very emphasis on the simple display of muscle, foregrounded by the films' collage structure, and the heroes' triumphs through their deployment of those muscles, are an affirmation of the value of strength to an audience who was finding that it no longer had such value. The hero is often shown in conflict with machines, winning against elaborate war gadgetry (*La battaglia di Maratona*, *Il colosso di Rodi*), freeing people from giant wheels that have to be endlessly, mindlessly turned by hordes of men (*Nel segno di Roma*, *Sette contro tutti*, *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*). His triumph over the machine by body alone offers the audience a fantasy of triumph over their new conditions of labour in terms of their traditional resources.

Yet these heroes, in many ways down to earth, are also sort 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. This is one of the structures of feeling that suggests continuities between the peplum and fascism.

Fascism had lasted in Italy over twenty years, twice as long as in Germany; in 1960, when the peplum was at a peak, fascism's demise was only fifteen years past. It was fresh in the memory, though not yet a common theme in cinema. Apart from the brief period of neo-realism, itself born of anti-fascism, it was not until the 1970s that Italy's internationally renowned *autori* (Bertolucci, Cavani, Fellini, Pasolini, Rosi, Wertmüller) started to make films about fascism. Popular cinema, more mindful of the need to address a large national audience where it was at and less inhibited by questions of what the right thing to say was, characteristically did deal with fascism, directly and indirectly in comedy, and in the peplum.

Italian fascism's imagery of masculinity centred on monumentalist imagery and, above all, on Mussolini, il Duce. The regime did produce the kind of massive statuary and painting (especially frescoes and posters) featuring big men in aspirant postures that is also associated with Nazism. The fascist-built sports stadium in Rome, the Foro Italico, is surrounded by statues three times life-size of muscular naked men in white stone (Plate 4.17). Sportsmen, notably 1932 heavyweight champion Primo Carnera (who appears as an antagonist in *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*), were promoted as emblematic of the regime and subject matter for artists, including the

photographer Elio Luxardo (Turrone 1980) (Plate 4.18), and increased sporting facilities and gymnastic displays were important aspects of policy (Felice and Goglia 1982: 184–7; Abruzzese 1983: 65). Yet such imagery, though important, was not saturating and, notably, it was almost absent from the cinema: the one attempt to harness the epic tradition to fascist ends, *Scipione l'Africano* (1937), did not use a muscleman as hero and was not a great success (Hay 1987: 155–61; Dalle Vacche 1992: 27–49). *Scipione* was however, especially in the attendant publicity and reviews, obvious in its reference to Mussolini. For he was the supreme hero figure of the regime. Indeed, as a child wrote in one of the essays elicited by the film journal *Bianco e nero* when *Scipione* first appeared:

Era bello Scipione sul suo cavallo bianco. Però il Duce è ancora più bello e più bravo di Scipione.

(How handsome Scipio was on his white horse. But il Duce is even more handsome and brave than Scipio.)

(Quoted in Brunetta 1975: 77)

Mussolini, as Gian Piero Brunetta (1975) and James Hay (1987) have observed, was the Maciste of fascist Italy. He was so both, as it were, narratively and iconographically. His role in the story of Italy was that of the strongman (physically, morally, temperamentally) who could sort out the country's problems: unemployment, corruption, inefficiency. It was only in the mid-1930s that this became tied up with questions of Italy's greatness measured imperially (realised in the war with Ethiopia) and racially (the passing of anti-Semitic legislation in 1938). Iconographically, as Hay (1987: 227–9) details, Mussolini drew his gestures from silent screen heroes and his emblematic roles (warrior, builder, patriarch) from the fascist repertoire. Most significantly here he promoted these qualities through his body, in his stature and posture (aided by camera angles) when clothed, in the very display of himself when unclothed. He posed for photographs as a swimmer, athlete or bare-chested skier (Felice and Goglia 1983: 82, 88) (Plate 4.19); he appeared stripped to the waist working alongside peasants for photographs (very Maciste-like in Felice and Goglia 1982: 141) and in the newsreel film *Il Duce trebbia il grano nell'Agro Pontino* (Il Duce threshes wheat in the Pontine Fields) (1938); he was the model for the imperative that everyone should have the body of a 20 year old (to the point that he forbade publication of his date of birth (Milano 1982: 32)).

The relation of the peplum to the athletic, Mussolinian image of the male body is complex. A given film may seem to be both denouncing and applauding fascism. *Ercole contro Roma*, for instance, establishes Hercules's Greekness with unusual thoroughness and has him come to the rescue of the ordinary Roman people through the good offices of an Arab merchant-

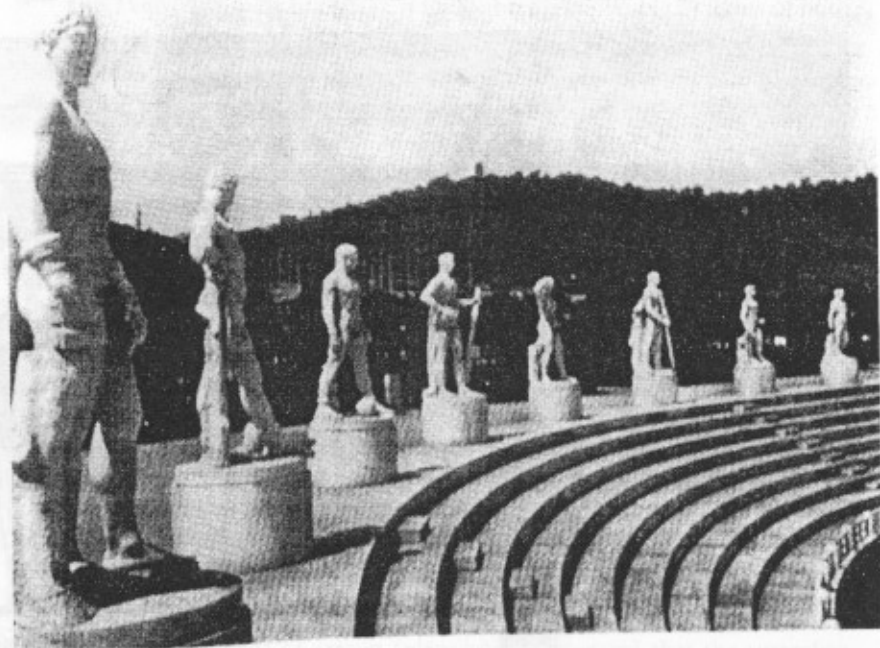


Plate 4.17 The Foro Italico, Rome, built in 1938; statues by Enrico del Debbio

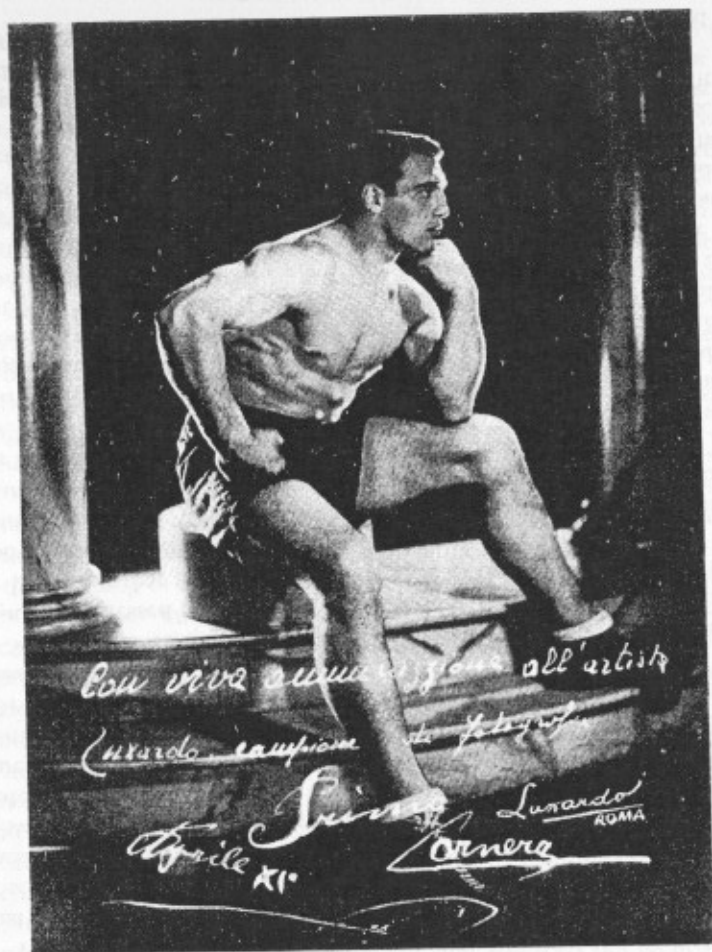


Plate 4.18 Elio Luxardo: photographic study of Primo Camera, 1930s



Plate 4.19 Benito Mussolini at Terminillo, 1930s

cum-messenger; yet the enemy of the people is a usurper called Afro, and what Hercules finally restores is a militaristic regime in which the legionaries elect the leader. He is against Rome in the name of Rome.

Such contradictions are characteristic. In many ways, in explicit allusions and through certain distancing strategies, the cycle is a rejection of fascism, yet in its address and narrative organisation it also shows continuities with fascism. Rather than attempt to side the peplum (and by implication its audience) either with or against fascism, it should be seen as an imaginary working through of the shameful momentousness of the period, shameful because it was fascist or because it was defeated.

Where there is explicit reference to fascism in the peplum, it is hostile. This is often expressed iconographically. The obviously fascist regime of Atlantis in *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*, breeding a flaxen-haired master race of men,<sup>19</sup> is emblematised in a vast Atlas-like statue in the queen's underground palace; the giant male statue bestriding the harbour entrance in *Il colosso di Rodi* is an object of hate, serving as a prison for dissidents and aimed at strategic dominance of the Mediterranean; the work camp in *Spartacus e i dieci gladiatori* is reminiscent of Nazi<sup>20</sup> concentration camps. Arena displays make oblique reference to the regime's mass spectacles and references to Rome are often coded references to fascism, because of the



importance of Rome in fascist rhetoric. The emphasis on Rome was both part of fascism's modernising attempt at national centralisation and a bid to suggest continuity with the empire of ancient Rome, which would place Italy at the forefront of white civilisation.

More generally, peplum societies are characterised by cruel authoritarianism, with rulers who have usurped power by force and trickery while often (by no means always) having the support of the hoodwinked people. Their aims can be avowedly racial: 'Inferior races must be subjugated to us' says the evil ruler in *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*; 'If we do not contaminate the purity of our race,<sup>21</sup> one day we will be masters of the world', says his equivalent in *Sette contro tutti*. It is usual for the hero to restore traditional authority. Significantly, unlike Mussolini, he is never himself a ruler, nor explicitly identified with leadership.

To this conscious if vague anti-fascism, we may add two important points that further seem to distance the peplum from fascism. First, the very absence of *Maciste et al.* from the cinema under fascism, and the revival of these pre-fascist heroes in the late 1950s, would suggest that if there was a harking back to the past it was to a past that Mussolini had displaced. The 'interpretation of fascism as a momentary "perversion" or "deviation", as a parenthesis in Italian history', with real Italianness to be found in earlier cultural continuities, was widely canvassed at the time (Cannella 1973/4: 12) and would accord with this rediscovery of the pre-fascist figures of *Maciste et al.*

Second, the casting of US, or US-seeming, bodybuilders is crucial. It should be stressed that it is not just that these performers were presumed to be US,<sup>22</sup> but that they looked it. The style of the built body was set by US bodybuilders in the post-war period (and especially by Steve Reeves (Sanguineti 1983: 88)) and the peplum stars' haircuts are those of Dean, Brando and Presley. This is sometimes emphasised in the contrast between the hero and his chief helper among the people: in *Ercole contro i figli del sole*, both Hercules (Mark Forrest) and Mytha (Giuliano Gemma), the Incan warrior he befriends, are very well built, but Mytha has straight, shoulder-length hair and a headband whereas Hercules sports the quiff and sheen of a rock star (Plate 4.20). The significance of the heroes' US-ness is above all that they were not Italian. Here was the display of the muscular male body promoted in Italian society only fifteen years previously stripped at a stroke of its fascist connotations. To this one should add the importance of the USA in the popular imagination in Italy, something both exploited by fascism but also a talisman on the left. US soldiers had spearheaded the liberation of Italy from Nazi occupation at the end of the war.<sup>23</sup> The USA was a land of modernity, as evident in these technologically honed, scientifically fed bodies. It was the land of the Common Man. Not least, it was a land of mass Italian emigration.

Yet for all its explicit anti-fascism, its heroes who are not rulers and its use

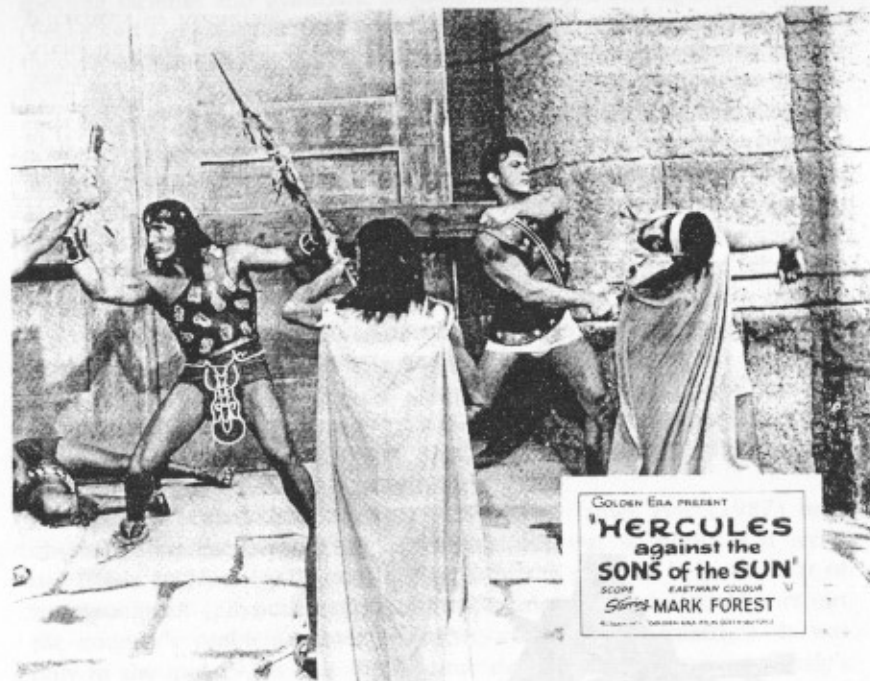


Plate 4.20 *Ercole contro i figli del sole* (Italy/Spain 1964): Giuliano Gemma and Mark Forrest (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

of pre-fascist figures realised in non-Italian bodies, the peplum also deploys fascistic structures of feeling. These were not necessarily invented by the fascists. As Abruzzese (1983: 65) argues, 'the national socialist use of the body has much deeper roots than the Mussolinian exaltation of the athlete', reaching back well into the nineteenth century; *Maciste* in the 1914 *Cabiria* prefigures the monumental incarnations of Primo Carnera and the regime's statuary. None the less, the regime had access to a repertoire of images very congenial to it and, by the time of the 1957–65 peplum, strongly associated with it. Moreover, though there were no *Macistes* during the fascist period, the regime had no need of them – it had Mussolini. Key aspects of the peplum – its address, the organisation of its narrative world, to say nothing of the hero's body – all suggest continuities with fascism.

These continuities are evident from a consideration of the regime's one epic, *Scipione l'Africano*, even though Scipio is no muscleman and its avowedly imperialist narrative is seldom found in the cycle. Nevertheless, he is a hero who is never wrong, never greatly in difficulty, and, like Mussolini, like Hercules or *Maciste* (or Tarzan or Rambo), the only answer to the problems at hand. Moreover, Scipio is not really offered as a figure

for the audience to identify with: for that the spectator has 'common man' figures in crowd scenes, lovers in sub-plots that show the impact of war, or simply the masses. Hay (1987: 152) traces this back to pre-fascist film spectacles, where through 'throng of extras, mass audiences were given a stake in the films' action' but in terms of a presence 'for whom the central characters acted'. The interests of ordinary people are met, and are only able to be met, by the strongman. This is the structure of the peplum. The way the hero is kept to one side of the narrative reinforces the sense that what is at stake in the narrative are the tribulations of the people, but that they have to be solved by the intervention of the hero: he is not involved in the action, he merely performs the vital resolving actions. The fact that the hero, unlike Scipio or il Duce, is not a ruler is part of the films' rejection of fascist polity even while it replays the appeal of fascism's strongman.

The peplum's contradictory relation to fascism (which, I want to stress, does not mean that the peplum is 'really' fascist but that it is, precisely, contradictory) is embodied in the hero, most explicitly in *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*. Here the wicked Antinea, Queen of Atlantis, oversees the breeding of a race of ideal men; when she encounters Hercules she of course realises that here is the ultimate specimen of ideal manhood; Hercules is opposed to this fascist regime but Reg Park's muscles embody its very ideals. The appeal of this body type, especially with renewed force in a period of class upheaval, remains throughout the peplum in tension with the memory of its exaltation in the disgraceful recent past.

The peplum offered its original working-class audience an affirmation of the value of the big strong body; its contradictions work through the problems of that body's association with a discredited recent polity. The implicit whiteness of all this comes to the fore in both the films' colonialist structures and their occasional use of black bodybuilders.

Like other muscleman films, the central narrative motif of the peplum is intervention. The hero arrives in a foreign land and sorts out its problems. This very often means that he fights on the side of an ethnic other. If need be, he will side with them against bad whites. In *Il figlio di Spartacus* (colour Plate 15), the hero, Rando, a Roman, is first won over to the North Africans' plight by seeing a crucified black man and then observing the enslavement of the people. He even goes so far as to observe that 'if Rome is for slavery, then I am against Rome'. Yet the people can only be saved by the intervention of Rando and Vezio, his bleached blond German comrade in arms. Moreover, the people suffer as much from barbarian tribes and Saracens as from Romans, and the latter are seen as corrupt individuals, Rando finally bringing about the restoration of the good Caesar's dominion. Rando, son of Spartacus, the slaves' champion, restores enlightened colonialism.

Pepla are not necessarily set in known historical or mythological nations, but when they are, those that predominate are the most geopolitically close

to Italy and subject of its most 'successful' colonisation (Libya), that is, Arab lands: Egypt (*Maciste nella valle dei re*), Mesopotamia/Iraq (*Ercole contro i tiranni di Babilonia, L'eroe di Babilonia, Golia alla conquista di Bagdad*) or just generically 'Arab' (*Maciste contro il sceicco, Il figlio dello sceicco, Maciste contro il vampiro*). Sub-Saharan, black Africa features only once (*Maciste nelle miniere del re Salomone*), partly because it was not territory of significant Italian migration, tourism and diplomacy, but also because of Italy's imperial brush with black Africa. Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 had been seen as the high point of the regime, the moment at which Italy seemed to enter the league of the great white nations by virtue of having an empire; but it lost it in 1941 (to other imperial powers, the Allies). Ethiopia, and thus black Africa generally, was an embarrassing reference point for Italian colonial adventures, and indeed *Maciste nelle miniere del re Salomone* represents Africa as a world with hardly any black inhabitants, ruled by machinating whites with 'Arab' names.

Whether the film is set in known or newly invented lands, Fanon's black:white 'Manichean delirium' (1970: 183) is strongly in evidence. This is often realised in the most literal way through dress and *mise en scène*. *Maciste contro i mostri* depicts warring (racially white) tribes in a prehistoric world. The bad tribe is black-haired and darker skinned, they wear black clothes, live underground and worship the moon, the symbol of night; the good tribe is fair-haired and light-skinned, they wear white clothes, live in overground dwellings and worship the sun, the daylight. Other pepla are less unrelenting in their antinomies, but such use of dark and light in clothing, skin colour, below/above ground, night and day, bad and good is none the less the rule.

Ethnically different peoples in pepla are generally played by white actors, but the differences signalled by *mise en scène* are those of racial difference in Eurocentric discourse. On the one hand there is a use of architecture, clothing, hair-styles, music and dance gestures to create a broadly oriental ('Arab' or 'Chinese') world, with luxurious court life and devilishly clever modes of torture (Plate 4.21). This is established in the Carthaginianism of forerunners like *Cabiria* and *Scipione l'Africano* and in the depiction of Lidia, all pagodas and tinkling music, in the second film of the cycle, *Ercole e la regina di Lidia*. It is not just a question of geography, but of the widespread use of orientalist motifs in the depiction of vicious rule in invented societies, as in, for instance, *Maciste contro i mostri* and *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*. In contrast, in other films or in the same film, there are the primitives, dressed in skins, living in huts or holes, skulking in the undergrowth, crude in their pleasures, brutal in their violence. In *Le fatiche di Ercole* the tribe that attacks the group on the island of the Golden Fleece are ape-like; in *Maciste contro i mostri*, the bad black tribe is accompanied by 'jungle' music and seen carrying game suspended from sticks, just like natives in Hollywood African adventure films. There can be variations

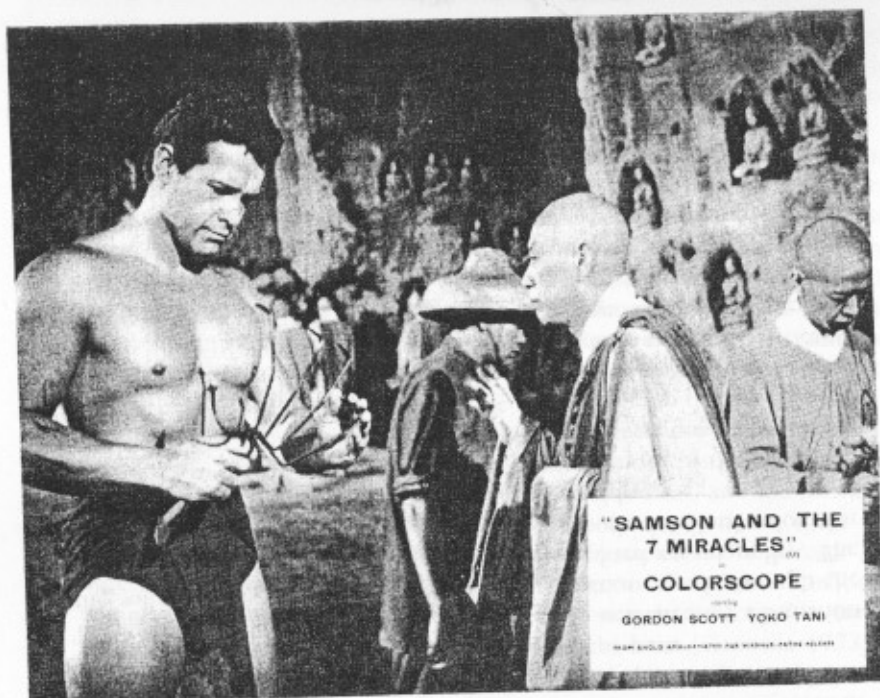


Plate 4.21 *Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan* (Italy 1969): Gordon Scott and Chu-Lai-Chit (BFI Stills, Posters and Designs)

in the primitives, suggesting degrees of civilisation. In *Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas*, the good white tribe is distinguished from the bad black tribe by wearing cloth not skins, living in a settlement not underground and having an elaborated belief system not just brute instinct.

The hero, who comes from without, is associated with neither the oriental nor the primitive, though he comes to the aid of the good or rightful elements in either. He is superior to both, cleverer than the orientals, tougher than the primitives. He contains their strengths, yet is not defined by either cleverness or toughness. On the contrary, often what is explicitly praised in the film is his 'simplicity'. He is unimpressed by the elaborations of Atlantis in *Erocle all conquista di Atlantide*; some older men in *Le fatiche di Erocle* contrast Hercules's admirable simplicity in sport with the current 'fanaticism and cult of the body'. The white man both comprehends orientals and primitives and yet is sublimely straightforward, not mired in sophistication nor yet driven by instinct.

Pepla do occasionally cast black bodybuilders, usually as a special case of primitivism. They are presented as possessed of a slave mentality, realising

that their best and true place is in subservience to the white man. In *Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi*, the unnamed slave (Wynter) stands by as Maciste is tortured by having to hold a rope in each hand at the end of which are teams of men; they pull in a tug of war and whichever loses will fall into a pit of lions; one team is white, the other black and when asked which team will win, the slave says the white one – he instinctively (it does not seem cynically) recognises racial superiority. In *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*, Maciste rescues Banco (Wynter again) from the mole men; as a result Banco says he will be Maciste's slave for ever, for he gave him life; Maciste says that Banco's mother gave him life, that there should be no masters and slaves, yet Banco is unable to accept this and throughout the film acts as a slave. Slavery is thus condemned but shown as what blacks, not whites, crave.

Maciste's refusal of Banco's servitude displays his moral enlightenment. This is often suggested by the hero's behaviour in combat with black men. Marco, the chief hero of *Sette contro tutti*, refuses to kill his black combatant in the arena. In *Arrivano i Titani*, Rathor (Serge Nubret) is at first a snarling slave who has run amok; however, in gladiatorial combat Crios defeats him but gets the king to allow him to spare his life; thereafter Rathor is Crios's devoted helper. In the process he changes character: before he meets Crios in combat, he has despatched another (white) opponent to his death and he smiles at his success, his sweating muscles gleaming in the torch light; after Crios has saved his life we have no more such shots of exultant physicality. When Maciste and the black slave fight in *Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi*, Maciste is at first under the influence of the slave's magic potion; there is a lengthy sequence in which Maciste is viciously beaten by the slave; when the potion wears off and Maciste recovers his superior strength and skill, he despatches the slave very quickly – while the black slave has lingered over the torment, Maciste just acts with maximum efficiency and minimum pain.

When the black man becomes the white man's slave, he is of limited practical help to him. The hero may occasionally need the black man, either as additional support or as sheer force; but the black man needs the hero even more, because of the latter's ability to size up situations, know right from wrong, do the right thing. This motif of brain versus brawn is explicitly commented on in *Arrivano i Titani*, which insists on its racial dimension by casting the very dark Serge Nubret as Rathor against (as Nubret 1964: 61 confirms) bleached blond Giuliano Gemma as Crios. Before they fight, all the gladiators have to choose swords; Rathor muscles his way to the front and picks the biggest, Crios stands nonchalantly by and winds up with the smallest. (White mythology's racial penis size obsessions require comment only in this bracket.) Yet in combat it is Crios's skill, his acrobatic swiftness of foot and eye, that win over Rathor's brute size. When Rathor selected the biggest weapon, Crios shook his head and said: 'Tutti muscoli, niente cervello' (all muscles, no brain). A little later, Crios, now favoured by the

King, watches a contest between a white man and a black bull; the former wins and the Queen comments, 'L'intelligenza trionfa sempre' (intelligence always wins).

There is an extraordinary scene from *Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo*, which encapsulates many of the characteristics of the peplum. The Queen of the mole people has had Maciste chained with a yoke across his shoulders on to which are lain more and more vast heavy weights; if Maciste buckles under the strain, prongs beneath the yoke will pierce his two companions who are tied down on either side of him. One of them, Banco, tells him not to hold the weights up on his account, thereby displaying both his slavish readiness to sacrifice his life and his lack of broader sense (since if Maciste does not hold the weights up he, Maciste, will be put to death). The Queen looks on and the film cuts to what she sees: close-ups of Mark Forrest's bulged and glistening pectorals and biceps. A point comes at which Maciste threatens to buckle; the weights slip, a prong enters Banco's chest, blood seeps out; by a supreme effort, Maciste pushes up the weight again and then higher and higher until he is holding it aloft above his head; as the music climaxes, a reaction shot of the Queen shows her breathing and gulping with an excitement that it is hard not to read as orgasmic. The set-piece muscle display, the lusting bad woman's point of view, the white man's triumph in the fiendish underground orientalist test, a triumph spurred on by his moral compulsion to save the good black primitive, of such elements, here screwed up to an exceptional pitch of sado-masochistic delirium, is the peplum's construction of the built white male body in colonial enterprise composed.

The peplum validates the image of the physically strong male body. It asserts this through the pleasures of adventure and desirability (everyone admires the hero's strength and women adore it). It negotiates the difficulties of its association with fascism. These difficulties are also being reworked in the films' handling of colonialism and race. Both of these were at issue in Italian fascism, less stridently and apocalyptically than in Nazism, but none the less there. Colonial ambitions and the assertion of Romanness both laid a claim for Italy to be included at the heart of whiteness. Such a claim offers a sense of superiority ('at least I'm not a colonial black') to those at the bottom of the white heap. It is always implicit in the peplum. The oddness of the cycle is that it simultaneously offers figures with whom the imputed audience may identify – the validated strong male body – and takes this away by placing them above the common man, exceptional like il Duce, and not played by Italians. The recourse to more explicit colonial structures, including confrontations with black bodybuilders, may be a strategy to overcome this: 'as a white man, I, an Italian working class man, may not be il Duce or an American, but they act on *my* behalf over against the Third World and racial inferiors.' Such juggling is crucial to the maintenance of white masculinity.

## Appendix: Peplum filmography

The first title in brackets is a literal translation; any others are the titles by which the film is known in English language distribution. The final name is the star playing the hero (character name in brackets if not eponymous).

- amori di Ercole, Gli* (The Loves of Hercules) 1960; Mickey Hargitay.  
*Arrivano i Titani* (Here Come the Titans; Sons of Thunder; My Son the Hero) 1962; Giuliano Gemma (Crios).  
*battaglia di Maratona, La* (The Battle of Marathon; The Giant of Marathon) 1959; Steve Reeves (Filippide).  
*Cabiria* 1914; Bartolomeo Pagano (Maciste).  
*colosso di Rodi, Il* (The Colossus of Rhodes) 1961; Rory Calhoun (Dario).  
*Ercole al centro della terra* aka *Ercole contro i vampiri* (Hercules at the Centre of the World/versus the Vampires; Hercules in the Haunted World) 1962; Reg Park.  
*Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (Hercules Conquers Atlantis; Hercules and the Captive Women) 1961; Reg Park.  
*Ercole contro i figli del sole* (Hercules versus the Sons of the Sun) 1964; Mark Forrest.  
*Ercole contro i tiranni di Babilonia* (Hercules versus the Tyrants of Babylon) 1965; Rock Stevens.  
*Ercole contro Roma* (Hercules versus Rome) 1964; Alan Steel.  
*Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (Hercules and the Queen of Lidia; Hercules Unchained) 1959; Steve Reeves.  
*Ercole sfida Sansone* (Hercules challenges Samson) 1964; Kirk Morris (Hercules), Richard Lloyd (Samson).  
*Ercole, Sansone, Maciste ed Ursus gli invincibili* (Hercules, Samson, Maciste and Ursus the Invincible; Hercules, Maciste, Samson and Ursus versus the Universe; Samson and the Mighty Challenge) 1965; Kirk Morris, Red Ross, Nadir Baltimor, Yann Larvor (in eponymous order).  
*eroe di Babilonia, L'* (The Hero of Babylon; Goliath King of the Slaves) 1964; Gordon Scott (Nipur).  
*fatiche di Ercole, Le* (The Labours of Hercules; Hercules) 1958; Steve Reeves.  
*figlio dello scicco, Il* (The Son of the Sheik) 1962; Gordon Scott (Kerim).  
*figlio di Spartacus, Il* (Son of Spartacus; The Slave) 1962; Steve Reeves (Rando).  
*gigante di Metropolis, Il* (The Giant of Metropolis) 1961; Gordon Mitchell (Obro).  
*Golia alla conquista di Bagdad* (Goliath conquers Baghdad) 1966; Rock Stevens.  
*Golia e la schiava ribelle* (Goliath and the Rebel Slave; Arrow of the Avenger) 1963; Gordon Scott.

- guerra di Troia, La* (The Trojan War; The Wooden Horse of Troy); Steve Reeves (Aeneas).
- Maciste all'inferno* (Maciste in Hell) 1962; Kirk Morris.
- Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan* (Maciste at the court of the Great Khan; Samson and the Seven Miracles) 1959; Gordon Scott.
- Maciste alla corte dello Zar* (Maciste at the Court of the Czar) 1964; Kirk Morris.
- Maciste contro i Mongoli* (Maciste versus the Mongols) 1963; Alan Steel.
- Maciste contro i mostri* (Maciste against the Monsters; Colossus of the Stone Age, Land of the Monsters) 1962; Reg Lewis.
- Maciste contro il vampiro* (Maciste versus the Vampire; Goliath and the Vampires) 1961; Gordon Scott.
- Maciste contro lo sceicco* (Maciste versus the Sheik) 1962; Ed Fury.
- Maciste il vendicatore dei Mayas aka Ercole contro il gigante Golia* (Maciste the Mayas' Avenger/Hercules versus the Giant Golia) 1965; Kirk Morris.
- Maciste l'uomo più forte del mondo* (Maciste the Strongest Man in the World; The Mole Men Battle the Son of Hercules) 1961; Mark Forrest.
- Maciste nella terra dei ciclopi aka Maciste contro le cyclope* (Maciste in the Land of the Cyclops/versus the Cyclops; Atlas in the Land of the Cyclops; Monster from the Unknown World; The Cyclops; Atlas against the Cyclops) 1961; Gordon Mitchell.
- Maciste nella valle dei re* (Maciste in the Valley of the Kings; Maciste the Mighty; Son of Samson) 1959; Mark Forrest.
- Maciste nelle miniere del re Salomone* (Maciste in King Solomon's Mines; Samson in King Solomon's Mines) 1964; Reg Park.
- Nel segno di Roma* (Under the sign of Rome; Sign of the Gladiator) 1959; Georges Marchal (Marco Valerio).
- Quo Vadis?* 1912; Bruto Castellani (Ursus).
- Romolo e Remo* (Romulus and Remus; Duel of the Titans) 1961; Gordon Scott (Remo), Steve Reeves (Romolo).
- schiaiva di Roma, La* (The Roman Slave Girl; Blood of the Warriors) 1961; Guy Madison (Marco Valerio).
- Sette contro tutti* (Seven against all) 1966.
- sette fatiche di Ali Babà, Le* (The Seven Labours of Ali Baba) 1963; Rod Flash Jlush.
- Simbad contro i sette Saraceni* (Sinbad versus the Seven Saracens) 1965; Gordon Mitchell.
- Spartacus e i dieci gladiatori* (Spartacus and the Ten Gladiators; Day of Vengeance) 1965; Dan Vadis.
- Ulisse contro Ercole* (Ulysses versus Hercules; Ulysses against the Son of Hercules) 1962; Georges Marchal (Ulysses), Michael Lane (Hercules).

- ultimi giorni di Pompei, Gli* (The Last Days of Pompeii) 1959; Steve Reeves (Glauco Leto).
- Ursus* (Ursus; Mighty Ursus) 1961; Ed Fury.
- Ursus e la ragazza tartaruga* (Ursus and the Tartar Girl) 1961; Joe Robinson.