The cinema was the successor of stage spectacles and eventually usurped their popularity. With ever-advancing technology it proved to be capable of overshadowing and outdoing its older rival. Films set in antiquity, not least films concerning the life, passion, and resurrection of Jesus, were an integral part of earliest cinematic history. Hence the popularity of passion plays, which had a long theatrical and quasi-theatrical tradition going back to medieval mystery plays. From 1879 on, the first American passion plays had been produced for theatrical performances. They were not without controversy because they raised the religious concerns of clergymen and educators. The first film adaptations of passion plays were shown in 1897 and 1898. The earlier of the two, entitled The Passion Play and directed by Walter W. Freeman, was unusually long for its time, with an estimated length of about fifty minutes. The film was a cinematic record of the passion play performed that year in Höritz, Austria. Its producers were Marc Klaw and Abraham Lincoln Erlanger, the theatrical impresarios who two years later were to bring Ben-Hur to the stage with immense success. The Passion Play was “almost certainly . . . America’s first feature film with a storyline.”¹ The second film, directed by Rich G. Hollaman and running to about nineteen minutes, was called The Passion Play of Oberammergau; it was produced as a successor to and rival of Klaw and Erlanger’s film. Despite its title it was

¹ On Klaw and Erlanger’s film, which does not survive, see Niver 1976, 1–12, with an outline of the film’s individual scenes on page 10. My quotation is from page 4.
not an adaptation of the Austrian passion play but an American recreation filmed on a rooftop in New York City.\textsuperscript{2}

Both these films derived their social and religious respectability from the long tradition of European passion plays.\textsuperscript{3} It is safe to say that the genre of cinematic spectacle was born with Klaw and Erlanger’s film. As has rightly been observed: “Religious subjects in general were an important genre for the early film industry.”\textsuperscript{4} Religion, works of literature generally acknowledged to be masterpieces and taught in schools, and history were just the thing to lend social and cultural respectability to a new medium whose origins had nothing respectable about them since it had become popular at fairs and in low-class nickelodeons: “cheap places for cheap people,” as the good citizens thought them to be.\textsuperscript{5}

Films had thrived on sensationalism from the start. But spectacle films were based on culturally accepted subject matter such as European history or literature. They could impart status to the fledgling medium and avoid criticism from respectable citizens or institutions. The theater was of particular importance as a kind of role model for early cinema:

The trend in favor of the theatrical story was initiated as early as 1908 by \textit{Film d’Art}, a new French film company whose first production . . . represented a deliberate attempt to transform the cinema into an art medium on a par with the traditional literary media. The idea was to demonstrate that films were quite able to tell, in terms of their own, meaningful stories after the manner of the theater or the novel . . . . From the lower depths the cinema thus rose to the regions of literature and theatrical art. Cultured people could no longer look down on a medium engaged in such noble pursuits . . . . Producers, distributors, and exhibitors [in Europe and America] were quick to realize that Art meant big business.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{2} Niver 1976, 13–27, provides background information on this film. For an older account of the early passion plays see Ramsaye 1986, 366–78 (chapter entitled “The Saga of Calvary”).


\textsuperscript{4} Musser 1990, 219.

\textsuperscript{5} Hampton 1931, 61.

\textsuperscript{6} Kracauer 1960, 216–17. The 1908 French film is \textit{L’assassinat du Duc de Guise}, whose production was supervised and whose screenplay was written by Charles Le Bargy, a member of the Académie Française (who also played the title part), and whose principal cast came from the Comédie Française. For a detailed outline of the representative process of cinema’s cultural elevation and social acceptability, achieved primarily through epic films on ancient topics and
Generally, films on historical and literary topics are the best examples for the cinema’s rise to respectability. In the United States the Bible and the plays of Shakespeare provided a ready supply of stories. Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and its early cinematic history is an instructive case. So is the 1925 version of *Ben-Hur* (to be discussed in the next chapter). Its souvenir program book makes the cultural significance of the story’s progress from novel to stage to screen explicit and emphasizes its public appeal and its edifying and instructive qualities—not without omitting the requisite advertising hyperbole. The souvenir book begins with a “Foreword: 1880–1925”:

SINCE GENERAL LEW WALLACE wrote the last words of *BEN-HUR* forty-five years ago . . . that immortal story . . . has been the greatest of fictional themes. Eagerly read in every English-speaking community and translated into many foreign languages, millions of copies have been sold and the circulation during the period has been as great as that of the Bible itself. This tale of Bible times was blessed by His Holiness Leo XIII. . . .

MR. A.L. ERLANGER . . . realized the deep desire for a stage play based on the book. . . . The success was instantaneous. . . . The vogue of *BEN-HUR* was due not only to the theme, the spectacle and the admirable acting but equally to Mr. Erlanger’s foresight and wisdom in maintaining the fine and reverential treatment of its grand subject by the author.

A FEW YEARS SINCE—in the newer art of the motion picture—Mr. Marcus Loew undertook the tremendous enterprise of visualizing *BEN-HUR* . . . and now presents it as a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer picture. The direction of the work was entrusted to Mr. Fred Niblo, with the aid of the most distinguished players of the screen and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s unrivaled art and technical resources.

MR. NIBLO has handled the story of *BEN-HUR* in motion pictures with all the tenderness and delicacy and dramatic power that the subject matter calls for. The most casual reader of the book or former patron of the spectacle knows the richness of the material and the splendor


and poignancy of the romance for picturization. It is now offered with the happy confidence that this immortal story has been filmed to the continual delight of millions of theatergoers in every part of the world where the newer art holds sway.

These points were apparently thought to be so important that they were made again. A few pages later, the next text section of the program book (“The Production of ‘Ben-Hur’”) is equally emphatic—and revealing even in its use of capital letters—about the transfer of respectability from stage to screen:

TRADITION clusters around “Ben-Hur” as the most remarkable stage achievement of America. It is fitting that this well-grounded tradition is upheld by the Picture Spectacle, in its turn the capstone of the picturizing art.

“Ben-Hur” [on the stage] effected epochal changes . . . the nature of its action and the fineness of its handling called to the patronage of the Better Drama millions of persons whose training hitherto had been sharply opposed to the theatre.

. . . the causes of its vogue are not hard to seek, for it was great drama and great Spectacle in the historical setting of the birth of Christianity in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. . . . Throughout its stage career “Ben-Hur” was wisely maintained at the level of its original excellence, elaboration, and reverent spirit. . . .

The Greater Ben-Hur exceeds the stage play, even as the Newer Art that has the whole world for its picturizing, exceeds the older one.8

So the new medium could present culturally accepted subjects that were educational, elevating, and even inspiring while not, of course, neglecting the audiences’ demands for thrills or spectacle. It could also point to its own seriousness as a new art form. And what better subject than classical Greeks and Romans and their biblical “relatives” to achieve all this?9 Consequently, the American Julius Caesar: An Historical Tragedy of 1908, to be discussed below, restages Caesar’s assassination by imitating Jean-Léon Gérôme’s painting The Death of Caesar. A well-known still

8. The quotations are from the inside front cover and pages 5–6 of the souvenir booklet (Ben-Hur 1926).
9. Bowser 1990, 128 and 255–56, respectively, mentions the 1910 version of Elektra, based on Richard Strauss’s recent opera, and the Italian Quo Vadis? as examples of films that appealed to a better clientele, even though the production company of Elektra had advised distributors to “bill it like a circus.”
from the film depicting the senate hall just after the assassination is an almost exact cinematic copy of Gérôme’s painting, if in black and white rather than in color. The point is clear: educated filmmakers want the educated among their viewers to recognize the source they used and to appreciate the cultural—and cultured—representation of this decisive moment. Film, when done right, is artistic, uplifting, educating, inspiring. The cinema always remains a commercial product, but at the same time it is good for you.

The cinema naturally took over various traditions and conventions from the stage. Among them was the raised-arm salute, as may be observed in the earliest Italian and American films set in antiquity. During the silent era Italy and the United States were the chief and unrivaled producers of cinematic “spectaculars,” as they were then called. Films successful in one country were usually exported, often with some changes, to another. In the U.S. the early Italian spectacles about ancient Rome became popular hits and influenced producers and directors. Since silent cinema could convey information to its audiences only visually and, to a smaller extent, through intertitles, subordinates’ reactions to commands, for instance, had to be expressed with gestures, just as greetings were more cinematic when actions replaced words. The use of title cards for the same purpose would merely have been repetitive and tiresome. So the raised-arm salute, already established on the stage and in American culture at large, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, was ready to make its debut on the screen.

*The Passion Play of Oberammergau* seems to have contained precursors of this soon-to-be-standard cinematic gesture. Scenes like “The Messiah’s Entry into Jerusalem” and “The Crucifixion” include figures whose right arms are raised toward Jesus in greeting, as by members of the crowd during his entry, or as a sign of lamentation after the crucifixion.

Of greater significance, however, is *La vie et la passion de Jésus-Christ*, *n. s.* [= notre sauveur, “our savior”; *The Life and Passion of Jesus Christ*], a French film begun in 1902 by Ferdinand Zecca, expanded in 1904, and, with Lucien Nonguet as director, expanded again in 1905 to a running time of about forty-four minutes. It is one of the earliest long films in history. This film depicts the story of Jesus in thirty-one tableaux. Well-known

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10. Examples are the Italian imports *Quo Vadis?*, *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*, and *Cabiria*, on which see, e.g., Bowser 1990, 210–12 and 258. Bowser, 266–72, examines the emergence of the perception of film as an art form immediately after her discussion of film as spectacle.

11. Musser 1990, 214–15, provides four stills from this film, including the two on which my observations are based. Regarding the latter, the figures important for my argument appear at the extreme lower left and right corners of the frame as reproduced in Musser’s book.
works by Gustave Doré provided some visual inspiration to the filmmakers. In 1903 its production company, Pathé Frères, had developed a stencil process to add up to four colors to each print, and the eventual result looks ravishingly beautiful. (It still does in its restored edition.) The film became one of the biggest and longest-running hits of early cinema history, shown by theaters, missionaries, and traveling showmen in Europe, America, Asia, and elsewhere. As a result the film was instrumental in establishing the cinematic look of the New Testament. It is likely that the film also influenced the visual appearance of antiquity in general in the new medium.

As is to be expected, Zecca and Nonguet’s color epic contains much gesticulating as a visual means of indicating characters’ emotions and general excitement. Various kinds of raised-arm salutes are prominently on view. The most memorable instance occurs in the scene in which twelve-year-old Jesus has been left behind in the temple in Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary find him among the learned doctors, Jesus rises from his seat, turns toward them, and greets them. At this moment he is standing sideways to the camera, his face in profile looking screen right. Jesus now raises his left arm to horizontal level, his hand bent upward an additional forty-five degrees, his palm facing out. Simultaneously he lowers his head and upper body while also moving his entire body slightly back and down by bending his knees. All this makes for a fluid, elegant, and elaborate gesture of greeting and deference toward his mother and foster father. (Figure 15) The gesture is a precursor of the politicized raised-arm salute that is to appear later. As will be seen in chapter 5, Cecil B. DeMille will resort to this kind of salute almost thirty years later in his film Cleopatra (1934), when a servant acknowledges Julius Caesar in virtually the same way, although, as a slave, he crouches far lower than Jesus does here. The reason that Jesus raises his left and not his right arm is due to the fact that he is facing to the viewer’s right. Had the young actor playing Jesus been instructed to raise his other arm, part of his body and perhaps even his face might have been obscured momentarily. People facing screen left in this film raise their right arms when saluting.

When Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we observe a small crowd raising and waving their arms, but one man greets Jesus with a straight raised-arm salute. After Jesus has died on the cross, the Roman soldier who pierces Jesus’ side with his lance is, a moment later, so greatly overcome by emotion that he gives Jesus a raised-arm salute (with his right arm since he is facing screen left); then he sinks down on one knee and weeps. After Jesus has risen from the dead, his disciple John twice greets the angel found in the empty tomb with his right arm raised
horizontally; he also bows slightly. Finally, in the tableau in which Jesus ascends to heaven, several of his disciples greet him with arms raised, the left one if they are facing right, the right one if they are facing the other way.

This early film is particularly instructive about salutes. It shows that gestures including those of arms raised in greeting, far from being based on an authentic Roman custom, are invented for the sake of visual activity on the screen; hence Jews and even Jesus himself can employ variants of the raised-arm salute. The film also makes evident that its makers did not consider the gesture to be specifically Roman. This becomes clear from another tableau. When we see Jesus before Pontius Pilate, a Roman soldier or officer in full armor, even wearing a helmet, acknowledges Pilate’s command to lead Jesus away by inclining his head. This Roman-dominated scene would have provided an obvious occasion for a raised-arm salute if this gesture had indeed carried specifically Roman connotations at the time of the film’s production. But nothing like such a salute occurs.

In 1907 Frank Oaks Rose and Sidney Olcott made a one-reel adaptation of *Ben-Hur* that provides another early example of the raised-arm salute on film. In this film, the gesture is shown as a general way of greeting before

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and after the chariot race, just as it had been on stage. That same year French film pioneer Georges Méliès produced, directed, and starred in the whimsical fantasy *Le Rêve de Shakespeare* (or *La Mort de Jules César*; English title: *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar*). Shakespeare sees in a dream Caesar’s death and the events surrounding it, which appear in double exposure on the screen. Denying the conspirators’ plea, Caesar raises his right arm, palm out; the gesture resembles the raised-arm salute but expresses Caesar’s rejection.\(^{13}\) The next year, however, the American *Julius Caesar: An Historical Tragedy*, a tableau-like adaptation of Shakespeare’s play of about sixteen minutes’ running time, contains several instances of the raised-arm salute. The two most important ones occur among senators entering the senate hall and in Caesar’s house on the morning of the Ides of March, when Casca and others come to escort him to that fateful senate meeting.\(^{14}\)

Also in 1908 American film pioneer D.W. Griffith made *The Barbarian, Ingomar* (sometimes referred to as *Ingomar the Barbarian* or simply *The Barbarian*).\(^{15}\) This Roman-Empire one-reeler is significant for being, after Rose and Olcott’s *Ben-Hur*, another important link between the popular stage and the cinema. Griffith, its writer and director, adapted parts of a play that had been highly successful on the London stage, Maria Lovell’s *Ingomar, the Barbarian* (1851). Her play in turn was based on the German verse drama *Der Sohn der Wildnis* (or *Wildniss*, in its archaic spelling) by Friedrich Halm. When it was brought to the United States, Lovell’s adaptation continued to be a great success and was performed in New York City in a variety of versions throughout the 1890s and until Griffith made his film. Two other companies produced film versions of the play.

\(^{13}\) Ball 1968, 35–36, describes the film, presumed lost, and provides a still image of the moment here discussed (ill. 5). A clearer reproduction is in chapter 2 of the DVD *Landmarks of Early Films, vol. 2: The Magic of Méliès*. Cf. the illustrations of the assassination as staged in New York in 1871 by Edwin Booth and in London in 1898 by Herbert Beerbohm Tree in Shakespeare 1984a, 60 and 62 (ills. 3 and 5). Since Beerbohm Tree’s sets were designed by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, this moment is frequently reproduced, e.g., in Hesketh Pearson 1956, 99, and in Shakespeare 1988, 36 (ill. 11).

\(^{14}\) This film was most likely directed by William V. Ranous. Pearson and Uricchio 1990 discuss it as a cultural product of its time, focusing on the reasons for the extreme condensation of a complex model into a short film. On the Vitagraph films see also Ball 1968, 38–60; he discusses *Julius Caesar* at 48–50. The film is accessible on videotape from a print with German intertitles in the British Film Institute—and with a curious slip on a title card before the battle of Philippi, on which Octavius is called by a pseudo-Italian-plus-German version of his name (“Octavio Cäsar”).

\(^{15}\) Niver 1985, 23, provides information about this film. Further details can be found in Usai 1999, 117–21 (no. 52; contribution by Scott Simmon and David Mayer).
in the same year. Film historians are convinced that the costumes worn in Griffith’s film actually came from the stage.\(^{16}\)

While it received high praise from critics in its time, a century later Griffith’s film looks rather quaint, if not simplistic. This is especially true for the characters’ gesticulations, which today appear excessive.\(^{17}\) But they are in the tradition of popular theater. So the raising and waving of arms reappears in this film’s ancient settings.\(^{18}\) It is worth remembering that Griffith filmed *The Barbarian, Ingomar* in Connecticut, whose proximity to New York reinforces the likelihood that the costumes came from there. (If the stage play had not been a success, neither Griffith nor anyone else would have made a film of it.)

In 1912 Sidney Olcott, of earlier *Ben-Hur* fame, directed a famous and immensely successful drama about the life of Jesus. This was *From the Manger to the Cross*, for which Gustave Doré was again a source of visual inspiration. This epic film, shot on authentic locations in Palestine and Egypt under sometimes trying circumstances, had a running time of about one hundred minutes. Olcott’s film is remarkable not for its use of the raised-arm salute but rather for the rarity with which this gesture occurs. It is seen clearly in only one scene, when the Three Wise Men meet each other in the desert en route to Bethlehem. Two of them raise their right arms, the third raises his left. No Roman ever does in this film. The gesture is obviously to be understood as a common ancient way of greeting, not a specifically Roman one.

The raised-arm salute regularly appeared in Italian cinema, too. In 1909 Luigi Maggi’s *Nerone* opened with Nero greeting and being greeted in this manner; the gesture recurs no less than three times in the immediately following scene. Later the people greet Nero and Poppaea in the same way, bowing down in addition. (Figure 16) The gesture is no more than one of social etiquette.\(^{19}\) Early films do not standardize the raised-

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\(^{16}\) In Usai 1999, 119 and 120, Mayer twice mentions this circumstance. Apparently it was important. The same use of stage costumes in a film seems to have occurred with *Julius Caesar: An Historical Tragedy*; cf. Uricchio and Pearson 1993, 158.

\(^{17}\) Cf. Gunning 1991, 225–26, and especially Pearson 1992, 38–51 and 154–56 (notes), on “histrionic” vs. “verisimilar” acting styles in the theater and in Griffith’s films, with the latter style beginning to supersede the former in the cinema around 1908–1909. The “extended bodily gestures of histrionic acting” (Gunning, 227) are still on display in Griffith’s *Ingomar*.

\(^{18}\) There are some contradictions about the film’s setting in the information provided in Usai 1999. The scene is Massilia (not “Massalia,” as Mayer, 119–120, calls it), i.e., modern Marseilles, and its environs. But although the characters’ names are Greek except for the Germanic Ingomar, the scene is not set in “ancient Greece” (118) or “Hellas” (117, the production company’s bulletin) but in the Roman Empire, as Mayer, 120–21, states repeatedly.

\(^{19}\) The American release versions have *Nero and the Burning of Rome* or *Nero, or the Fall of
arm salute nor make it exclusively Roman. In 1911 Enrico Guazzoni’s one-reel *Bruto* (*Brutus*) employs salutes that are more in the nature of theatrical gesticulation, but the raised-arm salute appears as well. The film, about eight minutes long, shows the conspiracy against and assassination of Julius Caesar. When Caesar arrives in the senate on the Ides of March, he and the senators greet each other with raised arms while earlier, at home, Caesar and his wife Calpurnia had greeted each other the same way. Their black domestic servant uses the same gesture. After the assassination the conspirators employ the salute again.  

Guazzoni, now generally but undeservedly forgotten except by a few specialists in silent cinema history, was one of the pre-eminent Italian directors of large-scale epics. His work is of special significance for our topic. Guazzoni made numerous spectacles on ancient (Roman and Egyptian) and other historical subjects and was often in charge of producing, writing, or editing his films and of designing sets or costumes for them.  

Figure 16. *Nerone*. The opening tableau: Nero, far r., being saluted. Ambrosio.

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20. Ball 1968, 116–20, describes the film and reproduces (ill. 23) two stills. The second shows the raised-arm salute in a crowd scene in the Forum after Caesar’s assassination.

21. For detailed information on Guazzoni see in particular Bernardini, Martinelli, and Tortora 2005, and, much more briefly, Prolo 1951, 52–56. Guazzoni’s films on ancient Roman subjects besides those discussed here are *Agrippina* (1911), *Fabiola* (1918), and *Messalina* (1923;
the consistency and prominence of the raised-arm salute in his ancient films is of great importance. It may well have prepared the way for what was to follow with *Cabiria*, a film to be discussed in chapter 5. Guazzoni’s *Quo Vadis?* (1913; some sources give 1912) is his most famous spectacle. This film, running for about two and a half hours, was to become one of the most influential early films ever made.\(^{22}\) With it Guazzoni established the sweeping historical epic on the screen and imparted immense prestige to the cinema as purveyor of culturally accepted stories that were inspiring and instructive.\(^{23}\) *Quo Vadis?* reveals Guazzoni’s strong predilection for the raised-arm salute because the gesture occurs wherever possible. (Hearty handclasps occasionally do, too.) From its earliest scene, both high-ranking Romans and their servants or slaves (from Egypt, Africa, and Lygia—i.e., modern Poland) employ the raised-arm salute. Those of lower rank usually bow down from the waist as well. Left or right arms may be raised equally. A color poster advertising the film even features the raised-arm salute at a rather improbable moment: the Herculean Ursus, while wrestling with just his right hand the savage bull to which Lygia, the Polish princess and the story’s noble heroine, has been tied, has raised his left arm in an appeal to Emperor Nero, whose box appears in the background.\(^{24}\) Assorted Christians even greet St. Peter with the raised-arm salute during a secret prayer meeting. Guazzoni was evidently fully aware of the high-class nature of his film, an adaptation of a Nobel Prize-winning novel, for he took care to be authentic in his depiction of the Roman world, e.g., with a flour mill copied from those excavated at Pompeii. Nor did Guazzoni neglect high art. His arena sequence is reminiscent of Gérôme’s famous and influential painting *Pollice Verso* (“Thumbs Down”; 1872); Guazzoni even reproduces the exact moment of a gladiator’s victory that is the picture’s subject. And his heroine at one point looks as if she had escaped from modeling for a painting by Edward Burne-Jones.

Guazzoni’s *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (1913; *Antony and Cleopatra*) is a loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s play.\(^{25}\) It reveals that the raised-arm

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\(^{22}\) The following observations are based on the only version currently available. It runs ca. eighty minutes and seems to derive from a French adaptation. On the film see Wyke 1997, 120–28.

\(^{23}\) On its impact on American culture and cinema cf., e.g., Jacobs 1939, 91–93.

\(^{24}\) A reproduction of this poster is in Bagshaw 2005, 20. Its caption misidentifies Ursus as a gladiator. He is raising his left arm because it is the one further away (from the viewer’s perspective) and in this way does not obstruct the scene’s focus, which is on the foreground action.

\(^{25}\) Wyke 1997, 73–78 and 82–85, gives details about the film, its plot, and its overtones of contemporary politics. See further Ball 1968, 166–68 and 345–46, and, more recently, Wyke,
salute, standardized and already similar to the later Fascist salute, is firmly in place as part of the cinema’s ancient iconography, although either the left or the right arm may be raised. Roman senators use the gesture in the senate and as a rhetorical flourish during their orations. Mark Antony first employs it while on his conquest of the East. The film is remarkable and differs from earlier and later films in that Guazzoni gives the salute only to Romans. Roman soldiers use it to acknowledge a command received, a function of the gesture that will become standard in cinema. Most of the film’s plot takes place in Egypt, but the Egyptians use a different gesture to greet each other and their Roman conquerors. They raise their arm, palm held vertically and facing out, then bow low, taking the arm down with them. Both the Egyptian and the Roman salutes are visually striking and enhance the story being told. This is particularly true for one of the very last scenes of the film, when Octavian is standing over the bier of Mark Antony and gives his fallen foe the raised-arm salute. All this did not prevent Guazzoni from declaring, shortly before filming started, that he would make his film “in such a way that the smallest detail will be in conformity with the strictest historical truth.”

The year before, Guazzoni had directed the two-reeler La rosa di Tebe (Rameses, King of Egypt). In contrast to the later film and its restrictions of the raised-arm salute to the Romans, in this film he had frequently given it to Egyptians. The film’s first large-scale scene, set among a crowd in the pharaoh’s court, contains an uncanny premonition of what was to come, both on and off screen. Among the usual variations there also occurs one exact instance of what would become the Fascist salute.

Guazzoni’s Caio Julio Cesare (1914) is a fictionalized epic biography of its subject. This film shows so many instances of the raised-arm salute that an introductory text added in the mid-1940s to the film’s American version by the evidently exasperated staff of the Museum of Modern Art complains of its “endless salutatory gestures.” As is by now to be expected from Guazzoni, Romans use it in all manner of situations. Private ones: at an aristocratic social function (in the very opening scene), at home between father and daughter or husband and wife (Caesar and Cornelia) and during the latters’ wedding ceremony in a temple (where ancient Romans did not get married). Public ones: in crowd scenes that visually foreshadow later Fascist rallies, as with the dictator Sulla’s parade through the Forum and Caesar’s triumphant return from his conquest of Egypt in the film’s most elaborate set piece; in the senate (Pompey to the

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senators, senators and Caesar to each other on the Ides of March, senators to Caesar’s dead body as it is being carried away). Military use of the salute occurs repeatedly, as between Caesar and his officers and soldiers. Also remarkable are the instances of the salute by a Vestal Virgin to Sulla and by the soothsayer to Caesar. A bizarre case is that of a Valkyrie-sized priestess of the Gauls, who arrives at Caesar’s door in Rome ostensibly to warn him off his Gallic Wars but really to assassinate him. Back in Gaul, her countrymen even greet her the same way.

Guazzoni’s set for the Roman senate hall in which Caesar’s assassination occurs is noteworthy as well. Positioned prominently in its center is a large statue of a male figure with his straight right arm stretched out horizontally, palm down. Around the wall behind the senators’ benches we see a band decorated with figures of Roman cavalry and foot soldiers, among others. But immediately above them runs another band, this one giving a famous quotation from Roman literature (somewhat abbreviated). At its heart is this exhortation: TV . . . ROMANE MEMEN-TO . . . PARCERE SVEBJECTIS ET DEBELLARE SVEPHEROS (“you, Roman, remember: spare the conquered but defeat the proud”). These words occur at the climax of Book 6 in Virgil’s Aeneid and are spoken in the Underworld by the shade of Anchises, the father of the Trojan prince Aeneas who is destined to become the ancestor of the Romans. Anchises ostensibly speaks to his son, but the words are really intended for the Romans of Virgil’s own time, the beginning of the empire. They are among the most noble sentiments in all of Roman literature and have often been taken as an expression of Rome’s “Manifest Destiny,” as we may call it, to bring justice and civilization to conquered nations. But when we now, in retrospect, see them on prominent display in Guazzoni’s film, and in close proximity at that with a (fictional) statue making an obvious gesture that was to be associated with a new and rather different kind of Roman Empire less than a decade later, as we will see in chapter 5, the effect is rather eerie.28

Other Italian directors show the salute, too, although they are not as taken with it as Guazzoni. The first scene in Mario Caserini’s Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii (1913; The Last Days of Pompeii) takes place on a Pompeian street and shows several instances in which Roman men and women employ this salute. (Figure 17) African slaves serving their Roman masters also use variants of it, as does even the Egyptian priest who is the story’s villain. In Bulwer-Lytton’s novel on which the film is

based, the raised-arm salute had never been mentioned. Caserini’s film also reveals the strong influence of Alma-Tadema on the décor of its domestic scenes. Given this artistic and literary ancestry, the film is one of the best examples of the connections between elevated nineteenth-century culture and early cinema.29

In Giovanni Enrico Vidali’s *Spartaco* (1913 or 1914) the Thracian slave Spartacus, now a gladiator in Rome, uses the raised-arm salute.30 Somewhat unusually, he does so when meeting his sweetheart, the daughter of Roman general Crassus, in a moonlit garden.31 Crassus, on his triumphal entry into Rome upon his return from Thrace, stands in his chariot and stretches out his arm in greeting to the crowd; he extends it again when entering the Circus Maximus to preside over the games. At his pulvinar he

29. Directional credits for this film vary. Sources also name Eleuterio Rodolfi as sole or co-director. A recently restored version opens with the allegorical figure of Father Time.

30. The film, which survives incomplete, is also known under its alternate title *Il gladiatore della Tracia*; its English titles are *Spartacus* and *The Revolt of the Gladiators*. On it see Wyke 1997, 44–46.

repeats it no less than three times. Still later, when he takes command of
the Roman army for his campaign against Spartacus, Crassus twice greets
the senators the same way. By now the gesture is firmly established in
the cinema, although it is not ubiquitous. The American Cleopatra: The
Romance of a Woman and a Queen (1912), directed by Charles L. Gaskill
for its producer and star, theater actress Helen Gardner, had not employed
the salute at all. When this Cleopatra raises her right arm, it is a theat-
rical gesture meant to convey emotion, but it is not a salute. However,
the Babylonian story in Griffith’s mammoth epic Intolerance, released in
1916 after an extremely complex shooting and editing process of about
two years, shows some instances of the salute alongside a more frequent
variant in which the palm is held outward vertically.

Another film about the life of Jesus, Giuseppe de Liguoro’s Christus
(1914), a feature-length spectacle with location filming in Egypt and
Palestine, signals to its viewers its claim to high culture from its very
beginning. It opens with a tableau of the Annunciation that imitates a
painting by Fra Angelico, just as its Last Supper imitates Leonardo da
Vinci. But it is also familiar with the iconography of the raised-arm
salute. Early on we observe Emperor Augustus dreaming of empire and
busy with the tasks of ruling; he then decides on the census that will
lead to Jesus’ birth in the manger. Augustus receives no fewer than three
messengers who deliver scrolls containing apparently important informa-
tion; each messenger salutes him in the accustomed manner and is so
greeted by him in return (if less formally, as befits the man in absolute
power). Facing screen right, the messengers raise their left arms; facing
them, Augustus raises his right. But non-Romans use the same gesture
as well. The salute recurs when the Three Wise Men and their entourage
are in King Herod’s court and when they find Jesus in Bethlehem. One
of Herod’s officers acknowledges the king’s command for the Slaughter
of the Innocents with the raised-arm salute. One of the Jews mocking
Jesus as King of the Jews bows down before him in ironic submission; his
raised arm and hand point first up and then down as he bends his body
to the ground. Then he strikes Jesus across the face.

32. Released forty years later, Riccardo Freda’s Spartaco (Spartacus the Gladiator or Sins of
Rome: Story of Spartacus, 1953) is highly indebted for some of its sets to Piranesi’s famous, if
fanciful, images of the dungeons of Rome and to Vidali’s film for its plot, but it has only very
few raised-arm salutes, such as a perfunctory one given to Crassus. The fact that the Colosseum
appears in one of the central sequences of Freda’s film, which takes place about a century and
a half before the Colosseum was built, reminds us that Italian filmmakers were and are just as
unconcerned about historical accuracy as their colleagues in Hollywood. Spartacus’ wholly
invented romance with Crassus’ daughter in the two films is another case in point. Vidali’s
Spartacus returns her affection, Freda’s rejects it.
Chapter Four

The year 1914 demonstrates conclusively the close ties among stage, cinema, and popular literature. The Universal Film Manufacturing Company released a prestigious remake of *Damon and Pythias* directed by Otis Turner, known as “the Dean of Directors.” Turner had made the first version of the famous and edifying story about the two Sicilian friends and their enemy Dionysius, the fourth-century-B.C. tyrant of Syracuse, in 1908. A highly successful stage play on the subject by Irish poet John Banim had been first produced in London in 1821. In the United States this play had become the inspiration for the fraternal order of the Knights of Pythias founded in 1864 in Washington, D.C. By 1914, the year of Turner’s second film version, the Knights of Pythias had grown to almost eight hundred thousand members. The following year the story was retold once again in a “dramatized novel,” a “tie-in” as it would be called today, to Turner’s film. It was illustrated with numerous film stills.33

Several of these still images are important for our topic because they show an instructive variety of raised-arm salutes and gestures.34 “The Triumphant Return through Agrigentum after Vanquishing the Barbarians” shows a number of civilians, mainly women, waving at the victorious army and its chariot-driven leader. But at least two small figures visible in the center background employ the kind of raised-arm salute that would soon become standard. “The Wooing of the Maid Calanthe by Brave Pythias” has a middle-aged man raising his right arm toward the two self-absorbed lovers, whose backs are turned to him; the man’s arm is horizontal, his palm down and fingers apart. “Then did the People Stand upon the Benches and the Clamor Deepened” is a standard crowd scene in a stadium; right arms are raised and presumably being waved about. The moment, at least in the appearance of this still image, resembles comparable scenes in later European films which have obvious political overtones. Immediately following it in the book is a still showing a political moment: “Knowing Damon is at the Wedding of Pythias, Dionysius arranges to be Crowned in the Senate.” A number of Greek “senators” are raising their right arms, elbows bent, either at the moment of voting or in saluting or acclaiming Dionysius their new ruler. As do the clothing, armor, and architecture of the film, the caption’s eclectic terminology also reveals that the film’s view of antiquity is generic. (Romans, not Greeks, had a senate.) The same is true for the raised-arm gesture. This becomes

33. Terhune 1915. The book’s illustrations are the most easily accessible images from Turner’s film.
34. I identify them by their captions in Terhune 1915, following page 72, preceding page 96, between pages 128 and 129 (two stills), between pages 168 and 169 (two-page still), and preceding page 297.
evident in a two-page spread indicating a climactic moment in the story and on the screen: “Pythias Defeats Aristle [sic], the Best Charioteer of Sicily, and Claims the Prize.” From his chariot Pythias greets the people in the grand box with his right arm raised high and straight; the crowd exhibits a variety of raised-arm salutes, right elbows bent or straight. A line of soldiers below the box have raised their right arms holding swords toward Pythias; their gesture is the gladiatorial greeting standard in Roman contexts. The last image in the book shows the redemption of the villain, his new bond of friendship with our two heroes, and the story’s happy ending: “Dionysius, Tyrant though He Be, Will Never Sever Friendship Such as This.” All three clasp hands; Dionysius’ right arm is raised upward, palm out and elbow bent. The moment faintly echoes David’s Oath of the Horatii.

Turner’s film shows us a kind of summary of the development of the raised-arm salute from stage to screen up to this point. In retrospect it is remarkable that this should be so at just the moment when a watershed occurred in Italy with the production of the largest, longest, and biggest ancient spectacle ever undertaken so far. The year 1914 was to prove a milestone for the popular and later political history of the raised-arm salute, as the following chapter will show.