A large number of films and television films made after World War II furnish us with proof that the Roman salute has become a visual stereotype and now appears to be almost ineradicable, and not only in Hollywood. Quo Vadis provided other filmmakers with a powerful model.¹ This chapter examines the vagaries and varieties of the raised-arm salute first in the cinema, then, more briefly, on television. I separate these two media, related as they are, to emphasize that the small screen is just as conservative as the silver screen as far as adherence to a tried and supposedly true formula is concerned.

1. Cinema: From Salome to Alexander

In Salome (1953), directed by German expatriate William—originally Wilhelm—Dieterle, Romans and Jews use the expected forms of the raised-arm salute, including Emperor Tiberius, King Herod, and Pontius Pilate. But two members of Herod’s palace guard on one occasion display a particularly silly salute when they first rotate their arms. In George Sidney’s musical Jupiter’s Darling (1955), set in the Second Punic War—the title refers to Hannibal, called “the singing conqueror” in the

¹. By contrast, David Bradley’s independent production of Julius Caesar (1950) displays only a loose raised-arm salute by Antony and Caesar when Antony offers Caesar the kingly crown at the festival of the Lupercalia. The fist-on-heart salute also occurs.
film’s trailer—Fabius Maximus, just made dictator, greets the people with the raised-arm salute in the Roman Forum. Then his mother arrives and greets him the same way. He in return greets her, arm raised, while they are talking to each other. The comedy in these two scenes is unintentional. Apparently, little or no thought or historical consciousness went into their staging. So it is no surprise when we see Sidney’s Hannibal giving the raised-arm salute, too.

Philip Saville’s *The Silver Chalice* (1954), also set at the time of Nero, has some scenes with the raised-arm salute patterned on *Quo Vadis*, as when Nero’s guests at a lavish banquet in his palace or the Roman crowd assembled for a spectacle before Nero’s imperial box greet their ruler. Simon Magus, the Samaritan magician and heretic familiar from the *Acts of the Apostles*, returns from Nero’s banquet dizzy with hopes of imperial favors and raises his arms in a series of vaguely “Roman” salutes as if he were practicing for his imminent introduction into the emperor’s closest circles. In *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, the sequel to *The Robe*, the salute appears perfunctory when the Praetorian Prefect greets Emperor Caligula by raising his left hand from the elbow up. In the arena Caligula also greets the crowd by raising his left arm, fingers spread. When he is proclaimed emperor by the Praetorians, Claudius is greeted by acclamation and raised-arm salutes, but not from all.

What about other ancient peoples in post-World War II cinema? In Pietro Francisci’s *Attila* (1954; *Attila the Hun*) a high-ranking Roman delegation suing for a peace treaty with the Huns greets Attila’s brother with the now standard salute; the latter returns it in the same way, although, being in a position of power, he does so rather condescendingly by barely lifting his right arm. Nevertheless the brief moment reveals that the Huns are familiar with this form of salute and may employ it themselves. In Robert Wise’s *Helen of Troy* (1955) King Priam hails an assembly of Trojan warriors with the raised-arm salute before handing over a suspiciously Roman-looking eagle standard to one of his officers. (Figure 27) Earlier, Paris had greeted Priam and Hecuba, his parents, with a raised-left-arm salute and received the “correct” salute from them in return. Some years later, in Giorgio Ferroni’s *La guerra di Troia* (1962), Trojan prince Aeneas receives a loose right-arm salute, with elbow bent, from a fellow Trojan—“Hail Aeneas!” is heard on the soundtrack of the English-language version—whereas Agamemnon, supreme commander of the Greeks in the Trojan War, gives permission to continue the funeral games for

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2. Simon may indeed have worked his magic in Rome, but at the time of Claudius, not Nero. Cf. *Acts* 8.9–24.
Patroclus with a far more modern-looking raised-arm salute, elbow straight. And in Rudolph Maté’s *The 300 Spartans* (1962), a film about the Persian invasion of Greece in 480 B.C., the commander of the Ten Thousand Immortals, the Great King’s bodyguard, employs the raised-arm salute before the climactic Battle of Thermopylae begins.

Romans may still raise their straight left arms in greeting even after modern history and popular media had made the right arm virtually obligatory. A noncinematic example appears on the cover of a bestselling novel. Rex Warner’s *The Young Caesar* (1958) and *Imperial Caesar* (1960) purport to be the autobiography of Julius Caesar. The former was republished as a mass-market paperback by the New American Library of World Literature in 1959 under their imprint Mentor Books—“Good Reading for the Millions.” The color picture on the front cover shows Caesar in a triumphal chariot in Rome, followed by standard bearers. (Figure 28) Caesar has here raised his left arm to greet the crowd in attendance; two members of the crowd are shown returning his salute, one raising his right arm, the other his left. Evidently, it does not matter all that much—any arm will do since the gesture is immediately identifiable.

This cover picture would hardly warrant mention if it were not for the fact that the novel’s author was an influential classical scholar, whose name was widely popular. Warner (1905–1986) was a well-known poet, historical novelist, and translator. He had read classics and English at Wadham College, Oxford, where he became friends with W. H. Auden

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3. The English titles of Ferroni’s film are *The Wooden Horse of Troy*, *The Trojan Horse*, and *The Trojan War*.
4. Warner 1959, quoted from back cover.
Figure 28. Rex Warner, *The Young Caesar*. Cover illustration of paperback edition. Author’s collection.
and C. Day Lewis. After World War II he was director of the British Institute in Athens. Later, in the United States, he was Tallman Professor of Classics at Bowdoin College (1961–1962) and professor of English at the University of Connecticut (1964–1974). His translations of classical literature were the standard English versions for many years, especially those published in the Penguin Classics series. So the cover image of his most popular novel is remarkable. Would not a scholar of his standing have objected to such a historically inaccurate image? Should he not have objected? (Since authors are not always consulted about such matters, it might be fairer to ask whether Warner could have objected.) Given the general ignorance of the true origin of the raised-arm salute in the twentieth century even among scholars, it may be best if we assume that Warner probably had no say in the matter.

Now back to the cinema. In the 1959 version of *Ben-Hur*, the most famous and popular Roman-Empire film worldwide, director William Wyler also resorts to the general view of a totalitarian and militaristic Roman Empire that Hollywood had propagated. Wyler, a Jewish émigré from Germany and a committed anti-Fascist, takes care to have his actors display the expected gesture with greater subtlety. Except for Arrius' salute to Tiberius in the scene examined in chapter 6, Romans now raise their right arm no higher than horizontal, as does Messala upon his arrival at the Roman garrison in Jerusalem, of which he is about to take command. (Figure 29) When Arrius arrives on his flagship to take over the Roman fleet, Wyler has his Roman soldiers employ a different salute: right arm raised to chest, fist touching heart, an echo of the American Pledge of Allegiance. When later the cry “Hail Arrius!” is heard, only one arm goes up. Still, Wyler’s conception of the Roman Empire continues the cinema’s tradition of presenting Rome as a conquering and oppressive military machine. Wyler was familiar with *Quo Vadis*.6

Richard Fleischer’s *Barabbas*, released two years later, features one of the most unusual because most spectacular arena sequences in Roman film epics. Although completely invented, it derives a good measure of excitement from being filmed in an authentic ancient location, the Roman amphitheater of Verona. Accompanied by a military entourage, the undefeated champion of the arena, who is a charioteer and *retiarius* (net fighter) combined, grandly enters the arena on his chariot to salute the emperor in his box. He and his soldiers raise their right arms. Since they all appear in an impressive long shot, they do not utter the verbal greeting (*Morituri te salutant* . . . ) that theater audiences might expect at such a moment.

George Stevens’s gigantic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), whose subject is the life of Jesus, shows us King Herod Antipas greeting a Roman officer (Figure 30) and High Priest Caiaphas greeting Pontius Pilate by raising their right arms, if only from the elbow. In Hollywood’s ancient Egypt we may observe comparable phenomena. Howard Hawks’s *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955) has the people greet their pharaoh with their left or right arms raised, elbows bent and palms held vertically outward; their ruler usually employs a straight-arm salute. Pietro Francisci’s *La regina di Saba* (1952; *The Queen of Sheba*) contains a scene in which a tavern keeper salutes his queen, who is visiting incognito, by raising his arm, albeit the left one. In comedy the salute may take an exaggerated form, as when Nero greets his mother Agrippina with his arm raised vertically in Steno’s *Mio figlio Nerone* (1956). Early in Mario Bonnard’s

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7. The film’s English-language titles are, variously, O.K. Nero, Nero’s Big Weekend, Nero’s

**Figure 30.** *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. King Herod (r.) receiving Roman officer. United Artists/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
Afrodite, dea dell’amore (1958; Aphrodite, Goddess of Love) the Corinthians hail Emperor Nero—off-screen because on board a ship sailing back to Rome—and the on-screen archon of Corinth with raised-arm salutes. The scene, although set in Greece, was filmed in Mussolini’s EUR. The film’s opening shot shows the gigantic marble sculpture of a nude athlete giving a unique version of the salute: his right arm is raised, elbow bent, but his palm is bent back even further and pointing upward at an angle. In King Vidor’s Solomon and Sheba (1959) both Jews and Egyptians employ raised-arm salutes. In Jerusalem a priest so greets Solomon in the temple. The pharaoh and some of his courtiers raise their arms to Solomon’s treacherous brother Adonijah, adding “Hail!” as they prematurely proclaim him king of Israel. On usurping Solomon’s throne, this brother is saluted with the straight-arm salute by his henchman, who may variously raise his left or right arm, also crying “Hail!” Some of the assembled Israelites follow suit. (Figure 31) The indiscriminate use of the gesture on the part of ancient Jews and Egyptians, who are bitter enemies in this biblical epic, appears rather eerie in the light of their descendants’ history in the twentieth century.

In Coriolano, eroe senza patria (1964; Coriolanus, Hero without a Country or Thunder of Battle), which is set in the early Roman republic, director Giorgio Ferroni has the Romans even raise their left arms sideways, away from their bodies. That same year, in Ferdinando Baldi’s Il figlio di Cleopatra (Son of Cleopatra), it is Arabs who know and use the raised-arm

*Figure 31. Solomon and Sheba. Pharaoh, his court, and Adonijah’s henchman (r.) hailing the false king of Israel. Note variety of saluting gestures. United Artists/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.*

>Mistress, and Nero’s Weekend. (Take your pick.) Steno is Italian comedy director Stefano Vanzina (or Vanzini).
salute. Earlier, in Mario Bonnard’s *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii* (1959; *The Last Days of Pompeii*) two rather loose raised-arm salutes occur. The first of these is memorable, in the English-language version, for its charming verbal accompaniment: “Hail friends!” But more important is the loose variant of the raised-arm salute that occurs in Osvaldo Civirani’s campy *Ercole contro i figli del sole* (1965; *Hercules against the Sons of the Sun*). These solar sons are none other than Incas. The film is an example of the gleeful mixture of incompatible periods of history, geography, and culture that came to signal the final phase of the Italian muscleman epics.

In the early 1960s the iconography of the raised-arm salute in mainstream or big-budget Roman films began to change further. Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960) has little use for the raised-arm salute, for only relatively few examples occur in three and a quarter hours of screen time.\(^8\) Crassus, arriving at the gladiatorial school in which Spartacus is being trained, is greeted with the salute by its servile owner, but only in long shot and at the edge of the huge screen. A little later Crassus greets gladiators with a perfunctory raised-arm reply to their far more formal salute. “Perfunctory” is the best word to describe the forms of the salute nearly every time it occurs in this film. Senators salute Glabrus in the Senate and Crassus in the Forum when he is about to march against Spartacus. (Figure 32) Crassus’ staff so welcomes him upon arrival in his army camp. Such relaxed and loose ways of performing the raised-arm salute lack any forceful modern overtones. A revealing example occurs

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8. On the complicated production history and on various other aspects of this film and its influence see the essays collected in Winkler 2007.
when a legionary greets Crassus in his tent. He throws his right arm up into the air vertically and then down again in a loose-limbed motion. Later a centurion greets Crassus with a comparably loose gesture, his upper arm held horizontally away from his body, his lower arm raised at an angle of about seventy-five degrees to the upper limb. There is nothing as energetic or snappy about the salutes in *Spartacus* as there had been in *Quo Vadis*. To a smaller degree the same is true for Lionello De Felice’s *Costantino il grande* (1961; *Constantine the Great* or *Constantine and the Cross*). In the 1963 version of *Cleopatra* Julius Caesar’s raised-arm salute to Ptolemy, the boy king of Egypt, is even played for humor. (Figure 33) Neither this Caesar nor his writer-director, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, take the epic proceedings and the stereotypical trappings of Roman-Empire films all that seriously. Amerigo Anton’s *Giulio Cesare il conquistatore delle Gallie* (*Caesar the Conqueror*), made the same year, keeps the raised-arm salute for the Roman military, with arms straight or bent at the elbow and usually accompanied by a verbal Latin greeting. (“Ave!” is heard for addresses in both singular and plural.) Nevertheless the film has other forms of salutation just as frequently: manly embraces and right hands closed above the wrist. A variant of the right-fist-over-heart salute may be observed in *David e Golia* (1960; *David and Goliath*), directed by Richard Pottier and Ferdinando Baldi, in which the standard form of greeting is the placement of the open right hand near the left shoulder, accompanied by a slight inclining of the head. Mario Costa’s *Il gladiatore di Roma* (1962; *The Gladiator of Rome* or *Battles of the Gladiators*) even shows both the raised-arm salute and the mutual above-the-wrist-grip occurring within a minute of each other in one and the same scene. In the early
crowd scenes of *Julius Caesar* (1970), a film version of Shakespeare, director Stuart Burge has the people raise their right arms, but some of his Romans are waving their open hands while the majority, more unusually, are waving their fists. We can imagine how differently directors like Guazzoni or LeRoy could have staged such moments. In these later films the raised arms and the raised-arm salutes are devoid of political connotations and appear because they have so appeared for decades. The same is true for *The Three Stooges Meet Hercules* (1962), a forced comedy directed by Edward Bernds, in which we observe Hercules, riding into the arena, exchange raised-arm salutes with King Odious. Gerald Thomas’s *Carry On Cleo* (1965), the only ancient entry in the *Carry On* series of British farces, has several instances of rather loose raised-arm salutes. In later comedies things remain comparable, for instance in the French animated films about the cartoon heroes Asterix and Obelix. For example, in *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (1968; *Asterix and Cleopatra*), directed by René Goscinny, Lee Payant, and Albert Uderzo, a statue of Julius Caesar appears with its right arm raised, and Cleopatra’s Egyptian mercenaries give a loose raised-arm salute while getting the gladiators’ *Morituri . . .* greeting wrong. Later, in *Astérix et la surprise de César* (1985; *Asterix vs. Caesar*), directed by Gaëtan and Paul Brizzi, and in *Astérix chez les Britons* (1986; *Asterix in Britain*), directed by Pino Van Lamsweerde, similarly loose raised-arm salutes occasionally occur but lack any significance.

In view of the wide use of the raised-arm salute in American and European films set in antiquity, it is important for us to be aware that not all directors believed in the patterns of visual recreations of antiquity that had emerged since the earliest days of cinema. Writer-director Vittorio Cottafavi, who had made both ancient epics and other historical adventure films in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the heyday of these genres in Italy, is an honorable, if also rare, exception to the presentation of history and myth prevalent in popular films. Looking back on his career and on the genre of ancient epics, Cottafavi observed in an interview in 1983:

> La chose que j’ai toujours cherché à faire, c’est d’être cohérent ou respectueux vis-à-vis des manières de vivre des Romains, parce que la plupart des films était faux sur ce point: ils ne connaissaient pas la civilisation romaine, ils n’avaient pas correctement étudié ce qu’étaient la vie et les rapports entre les Romains . . . Dans les films que j’ai fait sur l’Antiquité, j’ai toujours eu un grand respect pour le sens de la romanité.

What I always sought to do was to be consistent or respectful regarding the Roman way of life, because the majority of films were wrong on
this point: they did not know Roman civilization, they had not studied correctly what life and relationships among the Romans were like. . . . In the films I made about antiquity, I always had great respect for the sense of what it means to be Roman.9

The one specific aspect that Cottafavi singled out as the most telling example of falsehood in standard ancient epic films is the raised-arm salute:

Ainsi on voyait faire le salut avec le bras levé, du genre nazi. Ce n’était pas le salut qu’on faisait à Rome. C’est un geste qu’on peut faire encore aujourd’hui, on peut lever la main et se faire un signe. C’était peut-être une manière de saluer avec respect, ou bien de répondre: l’homme à cheval répond au salut en levant le bras parce qu’il ne peut pas donner une accolade. Pour tous ces gestes—la façon dont mangeaient les Romains, leurs manières de vivre, de bâtir leurs habitations—, j’ai cherché à être véridique, à être assez fidèle aux connaissances dont nous disposons.

So they [the Romans] were seen giving the salute with their arm raised, the kind the Nazis gave. This was not the salute that one gave in Rome. This is an activity that one can still carry out today; one can raise one’s hand and make a sign to one another. This was, perhaps, a way of saluting respectfully or of answering: a man on horseback replies to a salute by raising his arm because he cannot give an embrace. About all such activities—how the Romans ate, their way of life, of building their homes—I’ve sought to be truthful, to be quite faithful to the knowledge we have at our disposal.10

These words and the fact that the interview excerpted here was conducted in French indicate that Cottafavi was as well-educated as he was thoughtful.11 Even so, at least some of the evidence in his body of work

9. Siarri-Plazanet 1999, 98 and 101. Cf. also Cottafavi’s words to similar effect about La rivolta dei gladiatori as quoted in Rondolino 1980b, 63–64. Cf. below on this film.
10. Siarri-Plazanet 1999, 98.
11. Leprohon 1972, 178–79, calls Cottafavi “cultured” and “a complete professional and probably more besides.” Rondolino 1980b makes evident on numerous occasions that this is not an overstatement. —Cottafavi’s other Roman films are Le legioni di Cleopatra (1959; Legions of the Nile, also written), Messalina Venere imperatrice (1960; Mescalina), and Le vergini di Roma (1961; Amazons of Rome or Warrior Women, co-directed). Cottafavi also directed two Hercules films that transcend the standard level of such films: La vendetta di Erode (1960; The Revenge of Hercules, Vengeance of Hercules, and even Goliath and the Dragon) and Erode alla conquista di Atlantide (1961; Hercules Conquers Atlantis or Hercules and the Captive Women). In later years Cottafavi directed
contradicts him. In his first Roman film, *La rivolta dei gladiatori* (1958; *The Warrior and the Slave Girl* or *Revolt of the Gladiators*), raised-arm greetings both of the standard and of a loose variety occur on the part of Romans and Armenians. (The story is set in the Roman client kingdom of Armenia during the third century A.D.)

Considerable care on the part of a committed filmmaker to show Romans on the basis of their familiarity with their history and culture and at the same time to make antiquity meaningful to his audiences is evinced by Anthony Mann, an exception among American directors of epic. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), the last silver-screen epic about Rome until the year 2000, is the only film ever made that attempts to do full justice to the greatness of Rome and consciously goes against the stereotypical presentations of Romans in the cinema. The ways in which the raised-arm salute occurs in this film are important because they tell us how persistent the cinematic tradition of raised-arm salutes can be even if a film’s emphasis is different from all others and, at the same time, how far the gesture has come by now. Fascist analogies to imperial Rome are not an issue in this film, not even in its first epic set-piece, in which Emperor Marcus Aurelius greets and reviews an assembly of leaders of the Roman Empire and then delivers to them a speech about the greatness of Rome. In this sequence the raised-arm salute occurs several times. Marcus is formally greeted by some but not all of the leaders with the standard salute, for at least as many salutes feature the right hand or fist being placed over the heart. The king of Armenia, soon to play a major part in the film’s plot, even stretches out both arms, then crosses them over his chest and bows to the emperor. Marcus returns the raised-arm salute a few times, but usually with his elbow bent. He also holds his raised right arm up in such a way that his palm is turned toward himself, not to those he is greeting. And at the moment that the assembled leaders collectively shout “Hail Caesar!” there is no raised-arm salute anywhere to be seen. It is unlikely that during the preceding decade a film director should have missed such an opportunity of giving his viewers what they would have expected. Evidently, if director Mann had wanted to present Rome as an evil empire of the stereotypical kind, this sequence would have afforded him several good opportunities to do so by reviving the snappy and ubiquitous salutes of *Quo Vadis*, on which Mann had worked under LeRoy. (He had been in charge of the Fire-of-Rome sequence.) But such is not the case in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. Some time later Marcus and his son Commodus meet on screen for the first time.

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highly regarded adaptations of Greek tragedies for Italian television.

12. I give an appreciation of this film’s qualities in Winkler 1995. See also Winkler 2009.
and the father welcomes him with a raised-arm salute that carries no Fascist implications at all. Commodus in turn greets his father only by placing his right fist over his heart. This is a common gesture in this film, presented as the standard salute in the Roman army. So the film’s first instance of the straight-arm salute takes on a different meaning. When returning General Livius, the film’s hero, gives such a salute to his emperor, it is an almost private gesture. Again, when Commodus is proclaimed emperor, the soldiers repeatedly shout “Hail Caesar!” The only salute that occurs at this moment is the placement of the fist over the heart. During his triumphal entry into Rome Emperor Commodus greets the people with a variation on the raised-arm salute from which obvious Fascist overtones are absent because Commodus quite noticeably is holding his fingers spread apart. (Figure 34) The film’s second half shows a heated senate debate on the future of the empire in the presence of Commodus. A few senators greet Livius, entering the senate hall, with “Hail Livius!” and raised arms. But Mann also has the emperor’s chief henchman raise his right arm, palm stretched out, in the familiar gesture. But this time it is not a salute because this senator is attempting to silence the room before speaking. Mann both follows the established iconography of epic cinema and simultaneously avoids some of its hoary clichés. We may compare Mankiewicz’s Julius Caesar, already mentioned, in which ostensibly Fascist trimmings of Roman-Empire films are both employed on the screen and subtly counteracted by its writer-director’s mise-en-scène.  

13. This is well demonstrated by Wyke 2004. She observes, for instance, that black-and-white photography, costumes, and sets “worked to establish . . . a political association with
In 1999 Julie Taymor’s *Titus* presented to filmgoers an intentionally anachronistic version of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. Influenced by Federico Fellini, especially *Amarcord*, and Pier Paolo Pasolini, especially *Edipo re* (1967; *Oedipus Rex*) and *Salò, o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975; *Salo, or The 120 Days of Sodom*), Taymor shows us a decadent and Fascist Rome. A number of scenes are set in Rome’s EUR in front of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. This part of Rome had been built under Mussolini for the *Esposizione Universale di Roma* of 1942. Emperor Saturninus, not entirely sober, gives a snappy raised-arm salute on the steps of the palazzo. (Figure 35) In his army camp Lucius Andronicus, Saturninus’ enemy, uses a variation of the hand-over-heart salute and is greeted so as well. We may conclude that Taymor attempts, somewhat uneasily, to appeal to both youthful and older audiences by combining antiquity with the more recent past and by resurrecting explicit Fascist overtones alongside other, more traditional, cinematic conventions.\(^\text{14}\)

Not until Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000), in large part an unofficial remake of Mann’s film, did the Roman Empire return to the big screen, replete with all the grandeur and decadence that were *de rigueur* in the tradition of Hollywood’s Roman films. As had been the case with *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, Commodus in *Gladiator* also triumphantly enters Rome but does not use the right-arm salute on this occasion. When he later greets the crowd in the arena he raises his right arm without holding fascism” while camera and musical score “helped provide . . . an anti-fascist narrative drive” (63); cf. 65 on “fascism, its persuasive attractions, and the need for resistance to it.”

it stiff. A little later he raises his left arm, keeping the fingers of his hand apart. *Gladiator* does not make imperial Rome as blatant a precursor of Nazism or Fascism as Hollywood’s Roman epics had done in the 1950s. But some visual reminders of Nazi Germany still occur, mainly through the influence of Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*. The raised-arm salute occurs again when a champion gladiator makes a spectacular entrance into the Colosseum. (Figure 36)

By the time of *Titus* and *Gladiator* the explicit analogies to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy that Roman-Empire films like *Quo Vadis* and others had used were less blatant on the screen because Fascism and Nazism had themselves begun to fade from popular memory. After the age of epic spectacles about the ancients a new evil empire, the Soviet Union, replaced the Roman Empire and furnished equally hissable but more contemporary villains with greater destructive powers. Even Roman films like *Spartacus* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* had carried some Cold-War overtones. In the early twenty-first century, more than fifty years after the end of World War II and over a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, Fascists, Nazis, and Communists are no longer all that


16. As an exception I mention, if only to include one example of the bottom-of-the-barrel filmmaking that runs parallel to mainstream cinema, the Italian violence-and-pornography exploitation film *Caligola: La storia mai raccontata* (1981; *Caligula: The Untold Story*), directed, if that is the word, by Joe D’Amato (credited as David Hills in the English-language version). An orgy presided over by Caligula can only begin after raised-arm salutes between emperor and some of the participants have been exchanged. Silliness, even in such a context, knows no bounds.
prominent in the cinema. Historical consciousness today is more diffuse. This is especially true in the case of film audiences whose average age has steadily decreased. Today the majority of mainstream American films are geared to appeal to young viewers, the main providers of box-office returns. So terrorists, serial killers, and assorted psychopaths have supplanted earlier cinematic bad guys. In addition, as *Gladiator* reveals, the rise of computer-generated images has made it tempting and easy for screenwriters and directors to neglect the social and historical backgrounds of their plots, to abandon convincing psychological motivations for good and bad characters alike, and to put most of their creative energies into dazzling action sequences and special effects. In such a cultural climate historical analogies tend to be vague. This is a deplorable tendency in general, but in the case of the raised-arm salute it may actually be for the better since it has to a considerable extent freed the Romans from the stigma of Fascism that had been foisted on them by a potent combination of modern popular culture and totalitarian history. A revealing example for this is a 2002 *New Yorker* cartoon that satirizes the worldwide box-office success of *Gladiator*, which was mainly due to its Colosseum sequences. The cartoon, set in a Roman arena, shows a mêlée of Christians and lions while a messenger addresses a rather soused and befuddled-looking emperor in his box with the requisite greeting “Hail Caesar!” The messenger’s right arm is raised. But his hand is bent back as far as possible, conveying no specific reminiscence of politics or history. Here the raised-arm salute is no more than what it had originally been: a visual cue that denotes something Roman but that is by now without any political or historical significance.

Even when a political comment is intended, modern cultural memory of the Romans and “their” salute can be on the vague side. Verbal analogies between the Roman Empire and the United States as a global superpower have been ubiquitous in the news media during the last several years. For instance, an article about President George W. Bush by a newspaper columnist based in Washington, D.C., begins: “He is an unlikely, incomplete and possibly still not wholly willing Caesar”; it ends: “it may not be too early to practice a lusty, ‘Hail, Caesar!’” Visual

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17. Lee Lorenz, “Hail Caesar! This weekend’s gross set a new record!” *The New Yorker* (November 11, 2002), 158.

18. Cragg Hines, “Hail W! How Bush Bestrides the World,” *Houston Chronicle* (March 23, 2002). With its deliberate echo of Shakespeare the title of this article reinforces the analogy expressed in the passages quoted. Cassius describes Julius Caesar, Rome’s most famous—or infamous—strongman, to Brutus in these well-known words: “he doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus” (*Julius Caesar* 1.2.133–34).
analogies appear as well. A clever example is the 2002 drawing by David Levine of President Bush as a Roman warrior in the breast plate and military “skirt” familiar from Hollywood epics. Behind his shield, on which the presidential seal is displayed, the tips of assorted rockets and other weapons are visible. In January 2007 The New Yorker featured the president on its cover as an American Nero plucking a lyre behind a lectern, on which the seal is again prominent. Visual comments on the new American empire may even resort to the still prevalent conception of the Roman salute. A photo collage that appeared on the Internet in 2002 is an example. Under the headline “‘Hail Bush’: a Roman salute for a born again emperor?” a photograph of Bush is merged with an arena scene from Gladiator. The president’s right arm is raised, slightly bent at the elbow, his palm open and his fingers not touching. His is clearly not a Fascist salute. But the headline and two quotations accompanying the image express the opinion that Bush is an extreme right-wing politician. The point is made without any subtlety. Nor is it completely convincing. But that it is made at all, and in connection with a popular film set in the Roman Empire, shows us that the power of cinema to shape people’s pseudohistorical awareness remains undiminished.

Two films depicting antiquity that were released in 2004 have no raised-arm salutes. But this is neither a surprise nor an indication that the salute is a thing of the past. In The Passion of the Christ director Mel Gibson and his collaborators are indebted to earlier cinematic representations of ancient Romans and Jews, for example in terms of architecture and costumes and in the manner of this film’s crucifixion scene. But Gibson’s Romans are far too obsessed with delivering sadistic torture to Jesus to have any time or inclination for social etiquette like acts of greeting. Wolfgang Petersen’s Troy, loosely based on Homer’s Iliad, contains only one instance of a traditional cinematic saluting gesture; it is the familiar one in which the right fist is placed over the heart. Although Troy is patterned on Robert Wise’s Helen of Troy, for instance in regard to the

19. The drawing was first published in The New York Review of Books (February 28, 2002), It is only one representative example of such iconography.

20. Anita Kunz, “While Rome Burns,” The New Yorker (January 22, 2007), cover. The president’s hairstyle is copied from that of the statue of Apollo at Olympia.


22. The quotations are the following: “There ought to be limits to freedom” (Bush) and: “There are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that; there never is” (White House spokesman Ari Fleischer).
Minoan columns that are prominent features of Trojan architecture in both films (which were produced by the same studio), it seems obvious that director Petersen, a German working in Hollywood, should have no interest in giving straight-arm salutes to any of his characters.\(^{23}\) Wise, as we have seen, had had no such qualms.

A third film of 2004 set in antiquity was Oliver Stone’s *Alexander*. Stone’s Alexander repeatedly raises his right arm, fingers apart, when he greets the crowds on his triumphant entry into Babylon. The first instance of his salute is close to the standard form, with arm and hand held straight out. Several following instances are looser, Alexander keeping his fingers from touching each other. (Figure 37) The gesture here looks close to the one Mann had given his Commodus on his triumphal procession through Rome. Stone also includes a scene equivalent to the episode reported by Arrian and discussed in chapter 1, in which Alexander, after receiving a serious wound, shows himself to his army. Now he does so without raising his hand at all, and the soldiers raise their arms only to wave them about. In Stone’s film no historical or political comment is intended with these gestures, but the presence of the salute, even if it occurs only briefly, indicates that it is unlikely to vanish from our screens altogether.

That same year, a minor instance of a fake-ancient salute could be observed at the beginning of Joel Schumacher’s *The Phantom of the Opera*, the film adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s hugely successful musical. An opera about Hannibal is in rehearsal at the nineteenth-century Paris

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\(^{23}\) The essays collected in Winkler 2006 examine Petersen’s film from various points of view.
Opera. A formation of soldiers is parading on stage and at one time giving the pectoral salute. But these soldiers are a chorus of girls. Mainly because of the women’s anatomy as emphasized by their chest armor, the salute here is slightly different. To connoisseurs of the cinematic varieties of Roman salutes this instance may look a trifle bizarre.

2. Television: From Star Trek to Rome

After the departure of the Roman Empire from the silver screen in the mid-1960s the small screen of television continued to provide viewers with a variant of the raised-arm salute, if sometimes in unexpected contexts. In a 1967 episode of the science-fiction series Star Trek, entitled “Mirror, Mirror” and directed by Marc Daniels, Captain Kirk and three of his crew are transported into a parallel universe which appears like a combination of Nazi Germany and the Roman Empire. The United Federation of Planets, a benign political entity modeled on the United States, has here been replaced by an empire whose character traits are patterned on Hitler’s Germany: sadistic violence and torture (“Terror must be maintained, or the Empire is doomed”), genocide (“You will die as a race”), and unquestioning obedience to authority, although for the military assassination of one’s superior officer is the best way to rise through the ranks. Roman overtones reinforce the message to the viewers that Kirk and his loyal crew are dealing with an evil empire. Vaguely ancient-looking clothing (gold cloth, a sash, an upper-arm bracelet), the mention of someone becoming “a Caesar,” and, first and foremost, a new raised-arm salute make the point. This salute, a variation on the pectoral salute already mentioned, begins with the right fist being placed over the heart; then the arm is stretched out (and usually up) before the body, open palm down. At the beginning of the episode the right arm is always extended horizontally, but later at regularly higher angles. (Figures 38–39) The result is simultaneously strange, especially in the futuristic context of the story, and utterly familiar. At one time the henchmen of this empire are characterized as being “like the ancient Gestapo.” This paradoxical phrase aptly expresses the standard popular analogy between imperial Rome and Nazi Germany. By contrast, the second Star Trek episode dealing with Roman themes—“Bread and Circuses” (1968), directed by Ralph

24. Roman-style overtones are a regular feature of this series; most prominent in this regard are the Romulans, an alien race whose society has praetors, senators, and proconsuls and whose origins go back to a small settlement in the marshes which later acquired a Forum and a senate building.
Senensky—presents viewers with what Captain Kirk calls “a twentieth-century Rome,” one that never fell. This surviving Roman Empire still has arena games, slavery, a Proconsul and First Citizen, a Praetorian Guard, and fake neoclassical architecture. The traditional themes of freedom and religious oppression are still the plot’s main driving forces, but the usual Fascist trimmings that characterize modern American presentations of Rome are wholly absent. The closest that we come to a raised-arm salute, for instance, is a moment when gladiators raise their right arms but then place their fists over their hearts.

Doubtless the most famous—because most widely watched—Romans of the 1970s are the members of the imperial family in *I, Claudius* (1976),
Herbert Wise’s highly successful adaptation of Robert Graves’s novels *I, Claudius* (1934) and *Claudius the God* (1935) for the BBC. The series was noteworthy for the adaptation of big-screen themes and visual styles to the small screen. A scholar has summarized these changes:

Television . . . altered the cinematic spectacle of Roman imperial power and corruption. In film, the spectacle is externalized, fully staged in elaborate, often monumental, sets, peopled by vast crowds, and accompanied by special effects. On television in *I, Claudius*, the family becomes the spectacle . . . [and] promises to reveal the workings of empire through a domestic drama . . . . The limits of budget and of the television screen turn the Hollywood signifiers of imperial Rome (armies on the march, gladiatorial games, fantastical debauches) into what are largely a series of gestures, most of which translate the spectacular into familial scenes or contain it within domestic space. So, for example, scenes at the gladiatorial games focus exclusively on the imperial family in their box relishing the violent struggle of imaginary gladiators to the roar of a Roman mob whose presence is suggested by sound effects. Any fully realized spectacles take place in the enclosed spaces of palace rooms or gardens. . . . For the rest, the television audience watches some acts of violent murder and, most often, characters conversing, exchanging confidences, and making speeches.25

The effect is repetitive, visually dull, and anti-cinematic. To make the point with only slight hyperbole, in an eleven-hour soap opera about the rich, (in)famous, and dysfunctional we follow endless parades of talking heads in endlessly repeated interiors. But *I, Claudius*, the spiritual precursor of an even longer if more cinematic sex saga co-produced by the BBC thirty years later (on this below), predictably and, given its limitations, almost by necessity adheres to any number of historical and visual stereotypes about the Romans. These include the straight-arm salute. Although it does not occur with the frequency one might have expected a decade or two earlier, it is still prominently on display. “Let the games begin!” proclaims Marcellus after raising his right arm to an off-screen crowd in Episode 1. In Episodes 2 and 3, for instance, messengers in standard-issue Roman uniform bring missives and salute in the accustomed fashion; the first such instance even features a clearly audible heel being clicked (or stamped on the marble floor). With such modern militarism

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firmly in place, viewers will feel familiar in this sex-and-violence saga: Roman business as usual.

Boris Sagal’s film *Masada* (1981) attempts, with at least some success, a more thoughtful presentation of the Roman Empire but, in view of its subject, the film returns to the standard portrayal of Rome as oppressor, especially at the end. The absence of overtly Fascist iconography is, however, noteworthy. The official Roman army salute is to put the right hand over the heart, open palm down. Nevertheless the legionary commander may still give a version of the familiar raised-arm salute, elbow bent at about a ninety-degree angle. Franc Roddam’s three-hour television film *Cleopatra* (1999), strongly indebted to Mankiewicz’s version, features the raised-arm salute when Caesar enters Rome, but it does not look particularly militaristic or Fascist. The fist-over-heart greeting, which seems to have been popularized by *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, also occurs here. In Kevin Connor’s television film *Mary, Mother of Jesus* (1999) the Romans again appear as precursors of the Nazis, not least in their dramatic function as persecutors of Jews, but they do not exhibit the raised-arm salute. Pontius Pilate raises his right arm at the trial of Jesus, but only to call for silence.

In 2001 distinguished writer-director Jerzy Kawalerowicz made the first Polish version of *Quo Vadis?* (with its titular question mark restored) as a television epic that lasts over four and a half hours. Internationally the film was released in various shortened versions as a theatrical feature. Variations of the familiar salute occur as expected. A Roman officer, for example, greets General Plautius with a raised-arm salute, elbow bent and lower arm and palm held vertically, to deliver a command from Emperor Nero. He then strikes his fist on his heart. It is unlikely that Kawalerowicz, who had been born in 1922, was unaware of the historical and pseudohistorical implications of the gesture. That here he combines a variation of the Fascist salute with a standard cinematic one is telling: he follows filmic tradition but avoids strict analogies between Romans and Nazis.

Further examples appear in the three-hour television film *Imperium: Augustus* (2003), directed by Roger Young and the first of a series of several projected epics about major Roman emperors. These are British-Italian-German co-productions on a large and expensive scale. The one about Augustus has the set pieces and the raised-arm salutes that we expect. The first salute occurs on the part of a Roman centurion, his elbow bent. More examples are seen when Julius Caesar triumphantly enters Rome after his victory at Munda and when, later on, the troops of Mark Antony parade past Octavian through the Roman Forum on
the occasion of Antony’s return to the East. On one occasion Octavian greets the Roman rabble with the raised-arm salute. Before Cleopatra’s dead body in Alexandria Roman legionaries hail Agrippa, the architect of Octavian’s victory at Actium in 31 B.C. Despite its disappointing plot—a soap opera set in Augustus’ family and with the historical background to his rule told in extensive flashbacks—the film takes pains to impress viewers with the accuracy of its sets and its cultural savvy. (This Augustus quotes Virgil.) But it cannot shake itself loose from the traditional cinematic iconography of the Roman salute. The same had been the case a year earlier in Uli Edel’s television film *Caesar* (or *Julius Caesar*). The senators officially greet Caesar, now made dictator, with the raised-arm salute in the senate house. Earlier, the Roman commoners in the marketplace greet Caesar with arms raised in loose gestures (“Good morning to you, Caesar” and “Hail Caesar”) to indicate his popularity. Pompey uses a comparable salute during his triumph. But right arms also go up when the senate votes. In the later installment *Imperium: Nero* (2004), directed by Paul Marcus, the raised-arm salute, with elbow bent, appears as a military form of greeting but does not look particularly Fascist; the standard fist-over-heart salute occurs as well. Emperor Claudius, on his triumphant return to Rome, holds his right arm horizontally in front of his body and then, with fingers slightly apart, to the side when he greets the people lining the sides of the road. When Nero appears at a banquet, one guest gives him the raised-arm salute; Nero himself greets those assembled with his right arm stretched out horizontally, his palm tilted slightly upward and his fingers apart. Similarities to the horizontal salutes in Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* are probably unintentional.

*Empire* (2005), a four-hour television series with multiple directors, purports to tell how Julius Caesar’s adopted son Octavius took power to become Augustus, Rome’s first emperor. The standard raised-arm salute is on display in the opening sequence, Caesar’s return to Rome, and appears with greater emphasis just before Caesar’s assassination when Cassius and the senators greet Caesar in the senate hall and again when Mark Antony incites the Roman crowd so to salute Caesar’s body in the Forum. The scene last mentioned is a rather unabashedly free reimagining of the most famous part in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. It indicates that the filmmakers were more concerned with telling a new version of a venerable story than with attempting to do justice to the past, either to great works of literature that deal with the same subject or to Roman history itself, to which this film’s plotline bears only the most fleeting resemblances. On the other hand, alert viewers will have realized from the beginning that Scott’s *Gladiator* and, to a smaller degree, Kubrick’s *Spartacus* are
the inspiration, if that is the right word, for Empire. Less obvious is the visual echo of Gallone’s Scipione l’Africano in a very brief scene set in the Roman Forum. Kubrick’s epic has also cast its long shadow over Robert Dornhelm’s television film Spartacus (2004), in which raised-arm salutes appear in two scenes in which Romans conduct important business of state. Glabrus, the first Roman commander appointed to fight Spartacus, salutes the senate and is saluted in return with raised right arms, elbows bent. In the same way the senate reacts to the proclamation that Pompey and Crassus have received “the honorable and noble title of Co-Consul of the Roman Empire” after victory over the rebellious slaves. Perhaps the senators’ diffidence expressed in their salute is due to this unusually silly formulation, replete with the common American mispronunciation of consul as “counsel.”

Also in 2005 a kind of Roman salute that attempts strenuously to avoid any similarity to the Nazi or Fascist salute could be observed repeatedly and with even greater impact in the British–American television series Rome, directed by divers hands. Continued for a second season that aired in 2007, its plot ranges from Julius Caesar’s conquest of Gaul to the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra. Obviously a story of twenty-two hours of screen time that deals largely with conquests, battles, great generals, and empires must demonstrate to its millions of viewers worldwide that the famous Roman war machine was as thoroughly and precisely drilled as that of any modern power (or superpower). So the visual aesthetic (if that is the word) of I, Claudius has been abandoned, and Rome looks much more like a “real” film, with regular outdoor sequences, action scenes, and other spectacular ingredients. Indoor and outdoor sex and violence are on plentiful display as well. And the military employs a right-arm salute as a regular part of Roman army ritual. As we have seen frequently before, these Romans follow military patterns that are familiar to contemporary audiences and can be heard in commands like “Dismiss!” or addresses of superior officers or Julius Caesar as “sir.” But despite all manner of intrigue, corruption, political murder, violence, and explicit sex that are attributed to them, these Romans are not the stereotypical evil conquerors familiar from Hollywood’s films of the 1950s. As a result their salute is not the familiar straight-arm salute. Instead, the military salute shown in Rome resembles the pectoral salute: first the right hand, palm down, is placed over the heart, then the arm is rapidly extended horizontally or higher to the front of the body. A telling example of how important the gesture is meant to appear to viewers demonstrates how filmmakers can use a fictional but vaguely familiar gesture as a means toward rather subtle characterization even of a major character. (Figures 40–41)
The moment in question occurs shortly before the battle of Pharsalus. Caesar, resting in his army tent, unexpectedly receives bad news about his enemy Pompey Magnus (who ought to be called either Pompeius Magnus or Pompey the Great) from an officer called Fulvio. (He ought to be called Fulvius.) In his excitement Fulvio forgets all military protocol: he omits to salute Caesar before delivering his message. This Caesar, however, closely resembles his historical model, for he keeps his cool even in adversity. He is not about to show concern, much less anguish or panic,
at this sudden information before even a single one of his men. To make this point to viewers, the filmmakers have the following brief exchange take place between Caesar and Fulvio in Caesar’s tent:

FULVIO: “Sir! Pompey’s legions are in the field in battle array.”
CAESAR: “Thank you, Fulvio. Have you forgotten how to salute?”
FULVIO: “I haven’t, sir! No excuse, sir!” [Salutes.]
CAESAR: “Gracchus, sound assembly! [To Fulvio:] Have Zeno saddle my horse.”
FULVIO: “Sir!” [Salutes again and leaves.]

This brief scene looks snazzy, and so throughout this long film do many others involving army salutes. They may well have delighted the Christian Falangists of America, whose gesture the actors in Rome largely imitate, although presumably neither they nor their writers or directors were aware of the Falangists’ salute or realized what ideology they might be thought to express. But there is more. Close analogies to this salute in Rome had occurred decades earlier on American television and European cinema screens. The variant encountered in “Mirror, Mirror,” the Star Trek episode discussed above, is almost if not quite identical, for there the right fist, not the open hand, had been placed over the heart. A salute virtually identical to the one we watch being performed with great smartness in Rome had, however, appeared over a period of several years during the 1960s in a series of German Westerns!26 The pectoral salute was the standard greeting of, for instance, the heroic Apache chief, the most romantic reincarnation of the noble savage, and his white bloodbrother, although with the fourth and fifth fingers bent while the right arm goes out from the body. (Figure 42 shows a moment from Harald Reinl’s Winnetou, 1. Teil of 1963; English title: Apache Gold.) These films, immensely popular domestically if less so abroad, are now virtually unknown except among a small number of European aficionados. More familiar is the moment in François Truffaut’s Fahrenheit 451 (1966) in which two members of the fire brigade-cum-police greet each other with the pectoral salute. This film depicts a totalitarian society of the future that is modeled on Nazi Germany, replete with thought control, book burnings, and black helmets and uniforms. (Figure 43) Although the left arm is used for this salute, the implications are obvious.

26. On the German Westerns, most of which were loose adaptations of novels or stories by popular author Karl May (1842–1912), a favorite author of Hitler’s, see especially Frayling 1998, 103–17 (chapter entitled “Karl May and the Noble Savage”).
Figure 42. *Apache Gold.* The salute in the American West as imagined in Western Germany. Rialto Film.

Figure 43. *Fahrenheit 451.* A variant of the salute in a futuristic totalitarian society. Enterprise Vineyard/Universal.