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The Roman Salute on Film

The raised-arm salute is one of the best-known symbols of Fascism, supposedly based on a classical Roman custom. But no Roman work of art displays this salute, nor does any Roman text describe it.

Well before Fascism, the salute frequently occurs in films set in antiquity, such as the American Ben-Hur (1907) or the Italian Nerone (1908), although such films do not yet standardize it or make it exclusively Roman. In Spartaco (1914), even Spartacus uses it. In imitation of such historical films, self-styled “Consul” Gabriele D’Annunzio appropriated the salute in its now familiar form as a propaganda tool for his political aspirations upon his occupation of Fiume in 1919. Earlier, D’Annunzio had been closely involved in Giovanni Pastrone’s colossal epic Cabiria (1914), in which variations of the salute occur several times. Notable other examples of the salute, by now a standard part of ancient iconography in the cinema, appear in Ben-Hur (1925) and in Cecil B. DeMille’s Sign of the Cross (1932) and Cleopatra (1934), although the execution of the gesture is still variable. Of particular importance for the visual record are two films by Leni Riefenstahl, Triumph of the Will (1935) and Olympia (1938). As is to be expected, the former regularly features the salute; the latter shows Hitler, German spectators and officials in Berlin’s Olympic stadium, and several victorious German and Italian athletes giving it. So do a number of athletic teams entering the stadium. In Italy, Carmine Gallone’s Scipione l’Africano (1937) uses the raised-arm salute as one of its chief visual means to turn Mussolini into a new Scipio.

After the fall of Fascism, Hollywood made the Roman Empire familiar to filmgoers by presenting it as a precursor of recent enemy empires. A case in point is Mervyn LeRoy’s Quo Vadis (1951), whose triumph sequence is modeled on Triumph of the Will, replete with the Fascist salute. In his 1959 remake of Ben-Hur, William Wyler, a Jewish émigré from Germany and a committed anti-Fascist, also shows a totalitarian Roman Empire but takes care to have his actors de-emphasize the all-too-obvious.

With the 1960s, the visual iconography of Roman films begins to change. Stanley Kubrick’s Spartacus (1960) has less use for the raised-arm salute than did its precursors. Anthony Mann’s The Fall of the Roman Empire (1964), the only epic film that attempts to do justice to the greatness of Rome, shows a triumphant Commodus greeting the Roman people with a variation on the raised-arm salute from which obvious Fascist overtones are gone. When a new Commodus triumphantly enters Rome in Ridley Scott’s Gladiator (2000), the salute no longer occurs.