...a More Sympathetic Reunion...

Ben-Hur (1959), Subtextual Adaptation, Sexual Politics, and the Art of Homoerotic Performance

ANNE-MARIE SCHOLZ
UNIVERSITY OF BREMEN, GERMANY

ABSTRACT

In this essay I will take a closer look at a legendary 'gay subplot' in the history of mainstream Hollywood film production—the unrequited love story between the Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur and the Roman tribune Messala in the 1959 Hollywood "sword and sandle" blockbuster *Ben-Hur*. I will focus on three heretofore neglected dimensions. First, the extent to which the subplot makes it possible to understand Ben-Hur as a subtextual adaptation of Gore Vidal's controversial 1948 novel, *The City and the Pillar*; secondly, how the link between the film and the novel by Vidal sheds light upon the sexual politics of homosexual rights as they were being conceptualized and developed after World War II; and, thirdly, how this subplot, far from having been 'slipped in', was fully integrated into the production not only through subtextual adaptation, but also via cinematography, music, and especially dramatic performance.

INTRODUCTION

During the filming of the epic 1959 "sword and sandal" blockbuster *Ben-Hur*, screenwriter Gore Vidal suggested to director William Wyler and producer Sam Zimbalist that the key to making the conflict between the Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) and the Roman tribune Messala (Stephen Boyd) dramatically sustainable was to imply an unrequited love story between the two men. Wyler, Zimbalist, and the up-and-coming northern Irish actor Boyd would take him up on it. Charlton Heston was not informed. Since the publication of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* in 1981, this "gay subtext" has become rather legendary, mostly because of the rhetorical efforts of Vidal, who would discuss its existence as something of an inside joke aimed at Charlton Heston, ostensibly for his straight masculine cluelessness. Heston responded in kind, leading to a "storm in a teacup" controversy that did a superb job drawing attention away from the element that made the subtext of *Ben-Hur* so effective and successful: the way it had been thoroughly integrated into the entire film by way of adaptation, cinematography, music and especially dramatic performance (Fig. 1).[1]

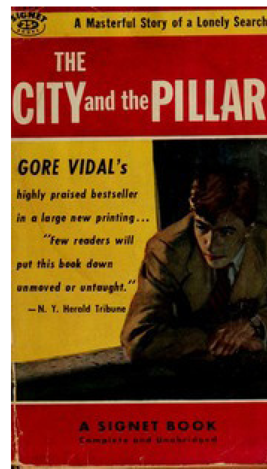
Fig. 1 | Messala and Judah Ben-Hur, 00:27:32. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Scholars who have since paid more careful attention to the gay subtext contextualize it in relationship to issues of Cold War homophobia and anti-communism in 1950s America (Tuszynski 119), or as a depiction of "the tendency of male desire to fuel erotics of power and domination among men" (Hark 170-71). These contextualizations are based upon a reading of the subplot as in

1 I wish to thank Leila Zenderland, John Ibson, and David Gerstner for their comments, suggestions and criticism in the writing of this essay, and Zoran Sinobad at the Library of Congress for assistance with locating sources.

absolute opposition to the Judeo-Christian values of the main plot: the return of Judah Ben-Hur to the world of women and heterosexuality associated with his conversion to Christianity. Ultimately, such readings implicitly favour a binary interpretation of the film that negates its homoerotic subtext. "As the film presents masculine desire," Ina Rae Hark concludes, "it is incompatible with salvation" (177).

A closer look at the film and its production history, however, reveals a more complex picture. Scholars now tend to agree upon the consistency of the homoerotic dimension between Judah Ben-Hur and Messala (Altmann 150; Barrios 268-72; Hark 170; Devore 129-30; Tuszynski 119), not just its role in the "establishing" opening "look" at the beginning of this nearly three and a half hour film. Therefore, it is time to analyze the cultural and literary context out of which this homoerotic subplot emerged and how it was integrated into the film by way of darkness, light, and colour in its visual and audio components, thus lending to it emotional and aesthetic legitimacy as an actively and consciously developed dimension of the film.



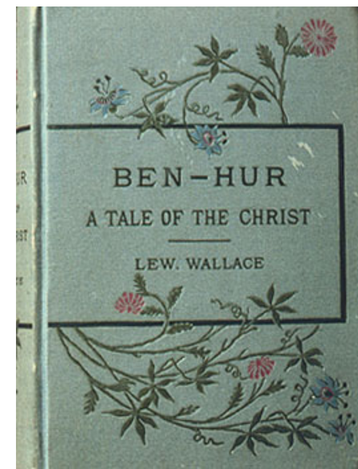


Fig. 2 (left) | *The City and the Pillar* (Paperback ed., 1950)[3]
Fig. 3 (right) | *Ben Hur* (First ed., 1880)[4]

ADAPTATION, TEXT, SUB-TEXT: *BEN-HUR* (1959) AS CULTURAL *PALIMPSEST*

Why is a more systematic reading of this gay subplot historically interesting and worthwhile? Notably, because Gore Vidal states in his 1996 memoir, *Palimpsest*, that the key dramatic subtextual leitmotif of unrequited love in *Ben-Hur* was derived from his own controversial 1948 novel, *The City and the Pillar*:

> Sam [Zimbalist] was behind his desk; .... Willy [Wyler] ... sat in a chair with his back to the window, the good ear turned disapprovingly in my direction. I had just told them that Ben Hur and Messala had been boyhood lovers. But Ben Hur, under the fierce Palestinian sun and its jealous god, had turned straight as a die while Messala, the decadent gentile, had remained in love with Ben and wanted to take up where they had left off. Yes, it was *The City and the Pillar* all over again; fortunately, neither Sam nor Willy had read it. When Ben Hur rebuffs Messala's advances, a deep and abiding hatred fills Messala to the brim. If not love (Rome spelled backward is "Amor"), then death. (*Palimpsest* 304-305)

The City and the Pillar is considered one of the first important literary works dealing directly with homosexuality following World War Two, and its controversial publication led to both a spot on *The New York Times* bestseller list and a major conflict between Vidal and the mainstream book reviewing establishment at *The New York Times*, who refused to advertise the novel and threatened to blacklist him. Concerned that now he would not be able to make a living solely as a novelist (though he continued to publish them), Vidal expanded into other media (*Palimpsest* 122). He went to work writing for television and was under contract to MGM as a screenwriter. By the late fifties, he had also written a successful Broadway play and was busy conceptualizing his future novel, *Julian.*

When he began contributing to writing the *Ben-Hur* screenplay, he already had some knowledge of ancient Roman history. While Vidal would not write another novel about an overt love affair between two men, the subtext in *Ben-Hur* strongly suggests that he remained very interested in, and committed to, legitimating the existence of same-sex relationships in popular culture. Thus it was that this 1959 production became, in key ways, as much an adaptation of *The City and the Pillar* as of General Lew Wallace's famous 1880 novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Scholz, *From Fidelity*, 3). Or, perhaps better, Wallace provided the "text" for the plot and Vidal provided, via *The City and the Pillar,* the text for the subplot.[2] This link makes it possible to actively read *Ben-Hur* within the cultural and historical context of gay identity and sexual politics following World War Two (Figs. 2 and 3).

Briefly, the first edition of *The City and the Pillar* centres on Jim Willard, a young white Southerner trying to figure out his identity as a man who loves other men.[5] His early love affair with a high school friend, Bob Ford, which involved a series of

2 I will be working with the terms "subtext" or "subplot" in the sense of Ernest Hemingway's well-known theory of omission in short fiction: "you could omit anything if you knew what you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel more than they understood" (Hemingway 75). While no great fan of Hemingway, Vidal's use of *The City and the Pillar* to give to the 1959 production of *Ben-Hur* its unspoken—if not unseen and not unheard—subplot would be an ingenious application of this principle to screenwriting and to filmmaking under the duress of potential censorship.

3 Source: https://archive.org/details/citypillar00vida

4 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben-Hur:_A_Tale_of_the_Christ#/media/File:Wallace_Ben-Hur_cover.jpg

5 It is the original edition (1948) of *The City and the Pillar*, not the more well-known revised edition (1965), that informs the subtext of *Ben-Hur*. The uncredited co-authors of the screenplay for *Ben-Hur* were Gore Vidal and Christopher Fry. The author given credit for the screenplay was Karl Tunberg.

sexual encounters at a log cabin on a weekend, becomes the basis for Jim Willard's conception of himself as a man and homosexual. After these first encounters, he leaves home and goes to sea; he then goes to Hollywood, joins the military, and travels to Mexico and New York, having a series of affairs with men, none of whom can compare with his early experience. His desire to get together with Bob again leads to a meeting that ends tragically: Bob rejects Jim's renewed advances and Jim, in a fury, strangles him. The essence of the novel is thus Jim's inner life and his tragedy; like Lot's wife gazing back at Sodom, Jim cannot free himself from a past ideal.

Throughout the novel, it is clear that Jim's developing homosexual identity is closely tied to a conception of what several scholars have called a "straight masculinity," that is a male rather than a female ('fairy,' 'queen,' 'queer,' 'gay') identified conception of homosexuality. Jim thus idealizes his sexual encounter with Bob as an encounter with his other masculine half. Indeed, in his experiences with the homosexual subcultures in New York and elsewhere, Jim vehemently rejects the then current definition of the homosexual as a "woman" identified man, meaning, in the mid-twentieth century, a man who plays the "passive" role in the sex act to the "active" role of his male lover, and dresses and behaves in a manner defined as "feminine" (Chauncy 99-100). He is thus sexually attracted to men who can "pass" as heterosexual and prides himself upon his ability to pass as such as well.

Scholars of the "homophile" movement who focus on gay sexual politics after World War II and prior to the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 are taking a closer look at *The City and the Pillar* as an example of a work very much in confluence with the goals set by homophile gay rights organizations that saw straight masculine performance as the preferred way for homosexual men to gain entry to civil rights in mainstream society (O'Donnell 50; Thomas 599; Meeker 115-16; Hansen 82). But to come out and speak of homosexuality directly, as Vidal had done in the novel, was not acceptable to the mainstream press in the United States. Despite this, Vidal's novel did create a literary source of empathy and solidarity with many gay male readers (Ibson 113-18), and was in line with the findings of the recent landmark Kinsey study on male sexuality (1948) that sought to cast a more "neutral" eye upon male homosexual behaviour.

After the vexed, though quite lucrative, reception of his novel, however, Vidal remained interested in finding a form of expressing his ideas that could reach a mainstream audience; for this purpose, the gay subtext in *Ben-Hur* would prove to be inspired. What the scripts he had been called in to revise essentially lacked, he convinced Wyler and Zimbalist, was a motivation for Messala's hatred toward Judah Ben-Hur. Vidal found that motivation in the hatred born of spurned love that underlay his own novel, and he brought it into the relationship between the Roman and the Jew. Clearly, Vidal's interest in this particular theme was anything but aesthetically or politically "neutral." Rather, his interest in "the motivation for all that hate" in a three and a half hour film was closely linked to his own literary interests in "the boundaries and meanings of male attachment" (135). While *Ben-Hur* could well have gone on and on without such a motivator, its inclusion made the film into a meditation upon the definition of masculinity. Vidal was a queer man, but in the context of post-World War Two America, he refused that label on grounds that it would be used against him—as it had been upon the publication of *The City and the Pillar*. What Vidal sought was not a "homosexual" identity, but the right to a masculine identity as a man who desires other men. If it were possible to create a representation of male homoeroticism that would move audiences, Vidal would have proven (if only to himself) that the "love that dare not screech its name" (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 305) was not a deviant inclination, but a variant of human love.

[I]t is time to analyze the cultural and literary context out of which this homoerotic subplot emerged and how it was integrated into the film by way of darkness, light, and colour in its visual and audio components....

"To be truly commercial is to do well that which shouldn't be done at all" (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 253). This would be Gore Vidal's implicit definition of the gay subplot in *Ben-Hur* in the first volume of his memoirs, *Palimpsest*—and a variation on the title of its longest chapter: "To Do Well What Should Not Be Done At All" (271). It begins with a film still of Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur, accepting water from the hand of Jesus Christ; a bare-legged Roman soldier is seen in the background, wielding a whip. The caption reads

> Charlton (or "Chuck," as we called him) Heston acting most powerfully in *Ben-Hur*, for which I wrote a script at Cinecittà in Rome, down the hall from Fellini, who was working on *La Dolce Vita*. Plainly, there is nothing in the acting line that Chuck cannot do. Note the expression on his face as he holds the gourd with phallus attached, a weapon of choice in Roman times. The whip in the background is a bit of S&M calculated to delight those audiences that revel in films about our Lord. (272)

While Vidal is enjoying framing a still depicting Ben-Hur accepting kindness from a stranger as a piece of gay pornography, he offers a venomous lesson in how the text/subtext dynamic of his plot functioned. It is the typical rendition of his own subplot that attacks Heston as a clueless pawn of a clever conspiracy. Such an angle may have been appropriate for a memoir like *Palimpsest,* dead-set on becoming a bestseller in the mid-1990s. But it is completely insufficient for understanding how the subplot actually gave to the film its central emotional life. When Vidal decided to draw from his novel *The City and the Pillar* in the late fifties, he was much more interested in legitimizing and mainstreaming a humane conception of homosexuality for American society, one

that sought to make it visible, central, and beautiful to behold, rather than depraved, marginal, or merely titillating. This he would ultimately do far more successfully and influentially with *Ben-Hur* than he did with his own novel, which remained, like all literature dealing explicitly with homosexuality, on the margins of the mainstream.[6]

What had contributed to making a gay subplot more potentially commercial, so commercial that even a director like William Wyler and a producer like Sam Zimbalist would risk its inclusion in what would be one of the most expensive filmic ventures in Hollywood history? In *The City and the Pillar*, Vidal developed an important theme that drew attention to the increasing centrality of homosexuality in mainstream society: he depicted not only the presence of, but also the conflicted interaction between, homosexual men during their military service in World War Two. This arena, as Vidal intimated in his novel and as Allan Bérubé persuasively argued in *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II,* proved to be something of a cultural game-changer:

> The massive mobilization for WWII propelled gay men and lesbians into the mainstream of American life. Ironically the screening and discharge policies, together with the drafting of millions of men, weakened the barriers that had kept gay people trapped and hidden at the margins of society. Discovering that they shared a common cause, they were more willing and able to defend themselves, as their ability to work, congregate and lead sexual lives came under escalating attack in the postwar decade. (255)

Despite its unprecedented success, *Ben-Hur's* well-done subtext was done well, in 1959, but at quite a cost. Vidal went completely uncredited for his contribution as co-author of the screenplay, and Boyd, inexplicably, did not receive an Academy Award nomination for his performance in this most Oscar-awarded of films, eleven in all. Indeed, it was Boyd's career, not Vidal's, that may have been "thwarted" (Cietaut 43) in crucial ways for his unabashed homoerotic performance, for he had finally brought to a 1950s Hollywood blockbuster a figure that had not been actively developed in Hollywood film since silent film superstar Rudolph Valentino: the "homme-fatale," counterpart of the "femme-fatale," a morally ambiguous male figure with bisexual audience appeal. If this figure was entertained at all, it was considered a more "European" entity, and unsurprisingly, most of Boyd's future films would repeatedly take him back to the continent he thought he had left behind him, "living out of a suitcase" despite having a homebase in Southern California, where he preferred to be, making westerns and playing golf ("Boyd Gets…"/Stephen Boyd Blog[7]). Henceforth, his Hollywood film career would be

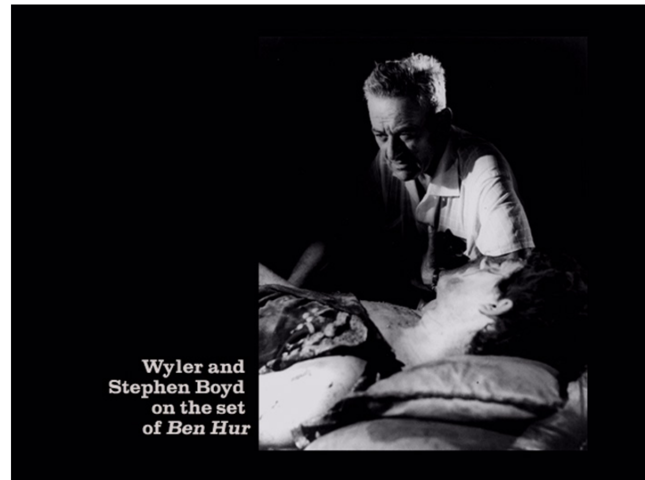


Fig. 4 | Source: Photo Gallery [Extras], *Counsellor at Law* (1933), The William Wyler Collection, Kino Video/Universal, 2002.

something of a thankless effort to keep him in costume epics in the hope of duplicating *Ben-Hur*'s success, rather than offering him a broader range of roles, such as those he had already excelled in prior to *Ben-Hur* (Cushnan 59-90/ Stephen Boyd Blog).

The case of Heston as not privy to the subplot, which his vehement denial of its existence in the mid-1990s reinforces, is significant in terms of the question of the subplot's production. By all accounts, the decision not to inform Heston lay with William Wyler. What did he mean when he suggested to Gore Vidal that Chuck would "fall apart" if he knew of the subplot? Wyler's skill in pursuing the subplot and sustaining Heston's heterosexual star persona testifies to his considerable empathy, which, in 1959, would have been less the norm than Heston's assumed resistance had he known about it. In other words, to gain more insight into the production history of *Ben-Hur*, attention ought to be focused more on Wyler's constructive role in bringing Vidal's subplot to life (Szczerbakiewicz 1, 13-17) (Fig. 4).

"Chuck hasn't got much charm, has he?" Vidal recounts asking Wyler after they both observed Heston and Boyd reading Vidal's homoerotic variations of key scenes. "No he doesn't," was his reply, "and you can direct your ass off and he still won't have any" (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 306). What was a source of amusement to Vidal would be Wyler's key directorial challenge with the gay subplot: countering Stephen Boyd's subversively charming Messala with a performance from Heston that offered just enough emotiveness to make the subplot plausible and authentic without jeopardizing Heston's status as a straight masculine icon of epic films.

Though Wyler later denied all association with Vidal's account of the gay subplot, his background as a filmmaker and

6 This is a more plausible reason for the "missing gay dynamic" in the most recent adaptation of *Ben-Hur* (2016) (Child). Explicitly gay themes may no longer "need" to be "hidden" as subplot, but on the whole, they are considered more appropriate for niche productions than for big money films striving for a mainstream audience. Another, even more plausible, reason is that the latest adaptation was not working with any other literary text akin to Gore Vidal's *City*, nor with a screenwriter intent on circumventing homophobic censors.

7 Where indicated, contemporary newspaper and fan magazine articles are archived and available on the Stephen Boyd fan tribute page.

director included and would include other projects that dealt with gay themes, notably, not one but two modified versions of Lillian Hellmann's play *The Children's Hour*: first in 1936, as a heterosexualized version entitled *These Three*, then later in 1961, with a restored gay theme as *The Children's Hour*, with Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine. Well known as a superb director of women, Wyler was also known for advocating politically progressive plotting and going to battle for more forthright treatment of sensitive issues in Hollywood films (Kozloff 470; Szczerbakiewicz 1). Further, his willingness to accept the subplot would have demanded its thorough integration by way of performance, cinematography, and dramatic development. Based on Vidal's account, Wyler's hesitation seemed less to involve the theme of homosexuality and homoeroticism itself than the implications of developing it within an overtly Judeo-Christian plot: "Gore, this is *Ben-Hur*, ***Ben-Hur*: *A Tale of the Christ*** or whatever that subtitle is. You can't do this with *Ben-Hur*..." (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 305). Certainly not coincidentally, the subtitle would be visually reduced to tiny background text in the publicity for the film upon its release (Fig. 5).

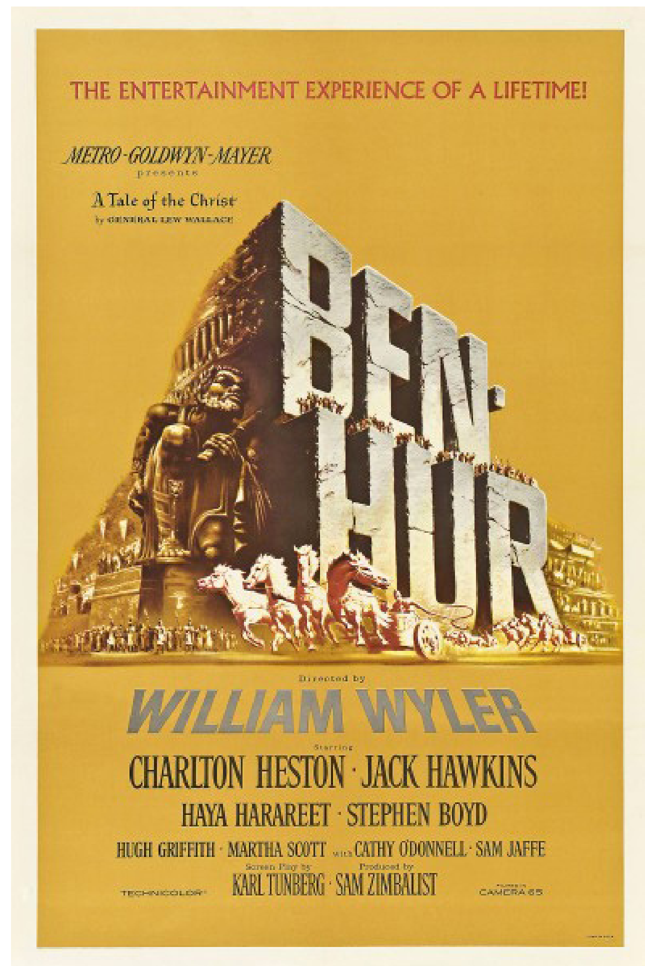


Fig. 5 | The subtitle "A Tale of the Christ" is reduced to marginal text. Reynold Brown, 1959.

BROWN VS. BLUE: COLOUR, ETHNICITY, AND PASSION

The key dimension of the central gay subplot (for there are several) was how it was to be performed by the actors involved. According to Vidal, the northern Irish actor Stephen Boyd was actively in on the subplotting and was "fascinated" by it (qtd. in Russo 77); his performance would be its centre, consisting of a series of intensely emotionally and erotically charged responses (reaction shots) to Judah. The most well-known dimension of this is the famous "look" he gave to Judah when they are reunited at the beginning of the film (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6 | Stephen Boyd, "brown-eyed" as Messala, 00:21:10. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

One of the aspects of the production that made this particular "look" possible was a change of Stephen Boyd's natural eye colour from blue (Fig. 7) to intensely brown contact lenses, which caused him a lot of physical grief during the filming and for which he was put under medical supervision (Cushnan 94-95, 100; Heffernan/Stephen Boyd Blog). Thus "Romanized," he would share this brown eye colour with his female nemesis for Ben-Hur's affections, Esther, played by the Israeli actress Haya Harareet (Fig. 8).

In addition to its function as a marker of ethnicity, the dark brown eye colour can function as a trope for emotional and erotic passion at the level of the subplot; at the plot level, it can be also be registered as evil or maliciousness, particularly when Messala goes into his vindictive phases (Fig. 9).

Wyler insisted upon the change of eye colour from the outset, ostensibly because Charleton Heston already had blue eyes. Nothing in the dramatic development, however, supports a unidimensional reading of the contrast between a blue-eyed hero and a dark-eyed villain.

But this "look" cannot be separated from other aspects of what the French film historian Michel Cieutat has called Stephen Boyd's "sublime" performance (50): the delivery and intonation of dialogue, as well as physical movements and gestures, dimensions which I will discuss at greater length later. Charlton Heston's blue-eyed—and Oscar-winning—performance as Judah Ben-Hur,

Fig.7 | Publicity photo, *Photoplay*, mid-1960s, green light for blue eyes.

Fig. 8 | Esther (Haya Harareet) with her father Simonides (Sam Jaffe), 00:55:46. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

within the parameters of the subplot, would consist in his far more sensually remote responses to Messala. The origin of this dynamic could well be attributed to Heston's "not being in on" the subplot. However, strategically, it is actually an adaptation of the unrequited love theme between the main character, Jim, and his adolescent lover, Bob Ford, in *The City and the Pillar*; hence, Heston did not need to be in on the subplot to assure an authentic performance, as Wyler would well have known.

RELYING ON "ROMOSEXUALITY"[8] AS CAMOUFLAGE

While the subplot as performed by Boyd was anything but hidden, the key to the camouflage of the homoerotic plot was the historical setting. Transposed into the first century Roman world, the subplot dovetails neatly into the depiction of nearly all the Roman soldiers in *Ben-Hur* as utterly male-defined and homoerotically oriented. This is not a coincidence, as Roman notions of homosexual desire (both imagined and real) have long been a part of a search for alternative models of same-sex desire in history and have informed Hollywood depictions of the ancient world from the outset (Ingleheart 2; Blanshard 252-53, 256). Chief among the characteristics of Roman (as opposed to Greek) conceptions of homosexuality included models of adult, long-term homosexual relationships with erotic, rather than idealistic or pedagogic, orientations (Endres 162-63; Ingleheart 6). The gay Roman military world as depicted in *Ben-Hur* calls attention to these varying and more complex patterns, including the suggested relationships between Judah Ben-Hur and the Roman Counsel Quintus Arrias (Jack Hawkins) (Hark 172), as well as between Judah and Messala and Messala and his "second in command," Drusus (Terence Longdon) (Devore 129-30; Prock 383). Indeed, the relationship between Messala and Drusus echoes the relationship between Jim and one of his interim lovers, Paul Sullivan, in *The City and the Pillar*, who, like Drusus, acts as something of an admiring observer and witness to Jim's (Messala's) lack of emotional—though not sexual—interest in him.

Further, obvious hints of sadomasochistic erotic practices between Messala and Drusus, and a good deal of well-oiled male semi-nudity, all paint a clearly homoerotic portrait, thoroughly decadent in the context of the overt plot, for Roman "decadence"—central to the main plot—was assumed. But because it also fascinated (Blanshard 255), it was unusually sensuous, unapologetic, and self-contained in its cinematic presentation, appealing, of course, to both male and female audiences. What with all the pomp and circumstance of Roman soldiers dressed in gorgeous black, gold, and red variations of a "cocktail dress," as Paul Newman once quipped to Vidal (*Palimpsest* 302), the shift to a queer sexual register was reinforced at every visual turn.[9] Without

8 The term is from Ingleheart.

9 According to Vidal, Paul Newman was up for the role of *Ben-Hur*, but turned it down because of dissatisfaction with his previous experience in the costume epic *The Silver Chalice*, hence the quip that he would never act in a "cocktail dress" again. Pressed by Vidal to elaborate, Newman—who was a friend of Vidal's—responded with "I didn't have the legs for it."

Fig. 9 | Messala after the second confrontation with Judah, 00:55:03. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

When Vidal decided to draw from his novel *The City and the Pillar* in the late fifties, he was much more interested in legitimizing and mainstreaming a humane conception of homosexuality for American society, one that sought to make it visible, central, and beautiful to behold, rather than depraved, marginal, or merely titillating.

mentioning that both were essentially "dresses," syndicated columnist Erskine Johnson described the dynamic in 1959 as follows: "A brass hat and the armor of a Roman warrior in 'Ben-Hur' does for Stephen Boyd what a tight dress does for Marilyn Monroe" (Johnson/Stephen Boyd Blog).

Indeed, what distinguishes Judah Ben-Hur's emotional and ethical priorities are his devotion to his family, which consists solely of women: his mother Miriam (Martha Scott), and his sister, Tirzah (Cathy O'Donnell), as well as his clearly erotic attraction to Esther, captured in Judah's intriguing "heteroerotic" look at Esther that parallels Messala's earlier look at Judah. Tirzah's romantic crush on Messala and his response to her are depicted as an utterly hopeless cause for her and a polite social distraction for him, so unalterably so that his every gesture toward and exchange with Tirzah makes it abundantly clear to the viewer that there can never be anything even remotely erotic between them.

Later, Christianity is dramatized as a force that is prioritized and insisted upon by Esther, Judah's female love interest, who sees to it that Judah sides emotionally with Christianity and women, rather than with Rome and Messala (Hark 177; Tuszynski 122). Within the overall homoerotic dynamic of the subplot, the roles of the unjustly condemned Miriam and Tirzah are passive and thankless until the point where Miriam insists to Esther that neither she nor Tirzah wants to see Judah again in her leprous form. Esther respects this wholly counterintuitive last wish, unique to the 1959 production, which leads to the final conflict between her and Judah that needs to be overcome following Messala's death.

In *Ben-Hur*, then, the heterosexual female and all she stood for in Cold War America was a completely marginalized figure. Most widely popular Hollywood films had heterosexual females and their search for heterosexual males at their centre. Stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day defined the heterosexual feminine in popular films of the day. On the other hand, equally popular were filmic adaptations of plays by Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958). In essence, both plots in their original staged versions focused on a tragic female figure who is confronted with the homosexuality of her romantic partner and the illusion of her own sexual centrality in the life of her spouse. In *Ben-Hur*, by way of Vidal's subplot, it is the gay man, Messala, who achieves the status of a tragic figure. The women, cured of their ailment through their conversion to Christianity, are restored to Judah Ben-Hur in the end on their own terms, but it is Messala who dominates the emotional life of Ben-Hur and monopolizes the audiences' attention, and whose fate is most moving.

DARKNESS, LIGHT, AND HOMOEROTIC PASSION

What the homoerotic plot thus succeeds in doing is not to cement a hero vs. villain logic, but to expand the possible meanings of the contrast between the Jew and the Roman (Radford 126-27). We are not in a world of pure good and pure evil, virtue and betrayal, as in the main plot. Rather, we are immersed in a series of emotional contrasts that are highlighted throughout the film cinematographically with light and dark hews, firelight, and shadow. I wish to demonstrate that in order to appreciate this dynamic, it is important to consider key scenes from Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*. [10]

Let me focus now on two scenes in *Ben-Hur* that can, on the level of subplotting, be linked to scenes in Vidal's novel that emphasize the link between darkness, light, and homoerotic passion. The first, the reunion of Messala and Judah Ben-Hur (Figs. 10 and 11), recalls the ideal romantic encounter between Jim and Bob at the cabin in the woods: a dark space, wherein they are alone, illuminated by firelight. Here is a passage from the novel's unrevised edition: "Their bodies, warm in the warm night, met with a primal violence: to be one, to be one not two, to be whole not halves, that was the rage that held them together: like to like, metal to magnet, joined in

10 A persuasive way to see this unique dynamic in *Ben-Hur* is to compare scenes in the film with scenes done with other actors auditioning for the main roles. Another sharp contrast can be seen in the later film *Spartacus* (1960), where the female players are much more central and the homoerotic ("oysters vs snails") subtext did not pass go with censors.

Fig. 10 | The reunion of Judah Ben-Hur and Messala, 00:20:47. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 11 | Reunion of Ben-Hur and Messala, 00:21:02. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 12 | "the look," 00:21:10. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

the true world whose fire is the only fire not the sun's, whose dominion alone among dream kingdoms is free of heavy earth and bending sky" (Vidal, *City* 28).

Then—in the film—follows: "the look" (Fig. 12).

Henceforth, we are in a world of competing emotional and erotic registers that reverberate with dark and light—precisely the register of Vidal's erotic scenes in the novel.

The scene where Ben-Hur and Messala reunite is the most widely discussed dimension of the homoerotic dynamic in *Ben-Hur*, though it has never been systematically evaluated in relationship to the first edition of Vidal's later, significantly revised novel. Not yet considered has been the link between the final fatal encounter between Jim and Bob in the novel and Messala's famous "death scene" in *Ben-Hur*, a scene not to be found in the original novel nor in other filmic adaptations. Here again, we are privy to an intense reuniting of physical forces which, darkened by the setting, recall the initial erotic encounter that will now end in death (Figs. 13-15). Here the charge of light, darkness, close physical interaction, passion, rage, and regret are, quite simply, dazzling, much like Jim's idealized memory of his first sexual encounter with Bob:

> Bob sat up. He turned instinctively to the fire, to that dim surrogate. Jim watched him. Their eyes met again and Jim, still dazzled, remembering, did not suspect Bob's sudden grim withdrawal and fear. (Vidal, *City* 28)

When a metaphorical "meeting with a primal violence" (28)—Messala's clutching Judah's vest and refusing to let go even in death—occurs, we are left with Messala's final words: "the race is not over" (Fig. 15). Like Jim Willard, he refuses to let go of the past: "Then, quite suddenly, he … saw again the firelight and he knew he could not change, that no dream ever ended except in a larger one and there was no larger one" (191-92).

After removing Messala's hand, Ben-Hur returns to the scene of his "triumph": the sunlit arena (Figs. 16 and 17). Deeply troubled by Messala's death, he becomes like Messala: vengeful and angry, especially at Esther, who he discovers has lied to him about the fate of his mother and sister—at Miriam's, his mother's, request. Now the subplot recedes and the main plot, returning Ben-Hur to Esther through the intervention of Christ's resurrection, concludes the film. Forty of 210 minutes remain.

Compelling here in this visual sequence is the complete inversion of the meaning of darkness and light in the context of the transition from subplot to overt developing plot. We go from the darkened operating table, which is dramatically lit with firelight that we never see (unlike in the initial scene), to the bright sunlit space of the arena, where we see the marks and bloodstains of the accident that killed Messala. Here, light is coded harsh, cold, and merciless, whereas the immediately preceding intimate death scene was coded warm and intensely erotic.

Linking these scenes in *Ben-Hur* to scenes in the first edition of *The City and the Pillar*, it is possible to understand how Gore Vidal's emotional and moral investment in the plot dynamic of his third novel takes on a unique and innovative form in the film. If *City* was Vidal's plea for a "masculine" understanding of

Fig. 13 | Death Scene, Drusus (Terence Longdon), Messala, and Judah Ben-Hur, 00:35:13. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 14 | Death Scene, 00:35:55. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 15 | Judah removes Messala's grip, 00:36:06. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

... it was essentially Stephen Boyd's performance that demonstrated that it was possible to present homoerotic passion to audiences in a way that would make it blend into the centre of a story about other things.

Fig. 16 | Judah returns to the arena, 00:36:43. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

Fig. 17 | Judah at the scene of the chariot race, 00:36:52. Turner Entertainment, 1959.

the homosexual man, this was meant, paradoxically, to normalize his emotional existence and demonstrate that he belonged at the centre, rather than the margins, of Cold War America. The novel, however, and its thesis, was rejected by the American cultural mainstream. In contrast, Messala's homoerotic passion for Ben-Hur *was not* rejected by audiences (and censors) around the world, attributed by one scholar to Vidal's ability to navigate subtextual discourse as a "Hollywood insider" (Devore 135). But it was essentially Stephen Boyd's performance that demonstrated that it was possible to present homoerotic passion to audiences in a way that would make it blend into the centre of a story about other things.[11]

VOICE, SOUND, SOUNDTRACK, AND SUBTEXT

How did Boyd create Messala as a gay male lover? Certainly, the reunion scene and the famous "look" are a key sign; however, what gives the component of passionate love (rather than merely lust) its grounding is Messala's voice, its pitch and timbre in key scenes, as well as, crucially, the interaction of the film's score and his voice. This pitch and this timbre are absent from Ben-Hur's voice in all the key scenes. Since Charlton Heston had a very distinctive and readily identifiable male voice as a major star of epic films, his timbre and pitch—compared to Boyd's—provide a vocal contrast throughout their major scenes together that suggest the dynamic of unrequited love, which is Vidal's aim. When Messala says to Judah, "I said I'd come back" and Judah responds with "I never thought you would; I'm so glad," the difference is physically palpable (0:21:12-0:21:20). The high-point of this dynamic is the second confrontation scene between Ben-Hur and Messala, when Judah begs Messala to release his innocent mother and sister:

"Beg?" Messala thunders ragefully, then reduces the pitch and timbre of his voice into a completely passionate mode:

"Didn't I beg you!?" (0:54:18-0:54:28).

Judah's passions, as conveyed in his voice in this scene, are utterly different ones. He is in a state of sorrow and despair and oblivious to Messala's continuing desire for him, just as Bob had completely suppressed their past story when he was reunited with Jim in *The City and the Pillar*. He even accepts Messala's argument that as a military leader interested in controlling Judea, he is prepared to sacrifice him in order to cement his reputation as a tough guy to potential rebels. Where Ben-Hur draws the line—and where his emotional investment is most evident—is with the women in his life. Under no circumstances can Messala's rationale include them.

As an actor, Stephen Boyd—born William Millar in 1931, the youngest of nine children, in Whitehouse, Northern Ireland—was especially attentive to the role of voice and elocution in his performances. Often recording his own dialogue as a form of rehearsal, his sensitivity to voice modulation was related to his life-long effort to suppress his Northern Irish accent, which he was able to use only once in one of his last films in 1977. His ambition to break into the theatre in Great Britain in the 1950s, and thereafter into film in Hollywood, made it necessary for him to develop what he called a "transatlantic accent," in order to get major roles and to avoid typecasting. For careful listeners, however, Boyd's Irish lilt is occasionally evident (particularly in the pronunciation of "r" sounds) and gives to his rich voice a more emotive quality when compared with Charlton Heston's edgier U.S. English elocution.

The emotive, sensual quality of the early reunion between Judah and Messala, as well as their "falling out," is actively complemented by Miklas Rozsa's film score. Indeed, Rozsca wrote a "Friendship" theme to highlight and dramatize the relationship between Judah and Messala, a musical dimension that would underscore "male interiority and male intersubjectivity" (353).[12] As Stephan Prock, a scholar and a musician, has insightfully argued, that theme "could represent two powerful yet diametrically opposed emotional relationships" and testified to Rozca's "musical ingenuity" (368). Of course, it also made possible a more thorough integration of the homoerotic subplot at the dramatic level. It is not difficult to imagine Vidal's subtextual theme of "spurned love" within the "exotic" register of the score's shift between affection and ragefulness. The theme accompanies the story long after Messala's death, implying Judah's continued emotional attachment to Messala, which is finally musically overcome by the themes of Christ's resurrection and Judah's conversion—a completely different type of music—and crucially, as Prock insists, one that uses sound to transform Ben-Hur to a masculine man who can return to the women (378-79).

There is an omnipresent death wish mixed in with Messala's remaining passion, which reappears in key scenes. In the second confrontation, he challenges Judah to kill him: "Go ahead, Judah, kill me!" (0:54:39-0:54:42). The tone of voice, here again, suggests, given his emotional state, that he desires Judah to do so, but that he knows, rationally, that he will not: Judah will not put Messala out of his misery. The death theme is repeated in the scene of Judah's return as a Roman when he has the gift of a valuable dagger delivered to Messala prior to his own arrival. Messala responds with: "Your gift is exquisitely appropriate, young Arrius. Do you suggest I use it on myself?" (2:03:20-2:03:28). Here too, the vocal expression is filled with quiet pathos: Messala exists in one emotional register; Judah exists in a completely different one. Death is on the horizon for Messala, and by the time we get to the chariot race, we intuit that he will get his wish.

The death scene after the race offers all of Boyd's vocal range that continually mix the vocal grain of physical pain and erotic desire. He literally wills Judah to him for a final meeting prior to the amputation of his legs: "There's enough of a man still

11 That would not be the case a year later in Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), where a significant subtextual homoerotic scene between Crassus, played by Laurence Olivier, and Antoninus, played by Tony Curtis, did not make it past the censors, and wasn't returned to the film until its video release in 1991 (Devore 131-135).

12 This dimension is also completely missing from the original piano score of the 1925 silent version of the film by William Axt and David Mendez.

left here for you to hate" (0:33:54-0:33:58), and then reveals that Miriam and Tirzah are alive and leprous. As Judah moves in closer to Messala, whose head is being cradled by the silent Drusus, Messala's facial expression suggests he longs for the proximity of this man, which he forces—at last—as he suddenly grips Judah's vest in a final spasm. Judah's expression of contempt and rage as he removes Messala's frozen grip gives dramatic testimony that the audience is witnessing a profoundly tragic unrequited love scene.

Messala's death wish as performed in *Ben-Hur* can certainly be linked to Roman "martiality" and notions of "honour." (As suggested, for example, between Quintus Arrius and Judah when the former tries to commit suicide after what he believes is military defeat and is prevented from doing so by Judah.) However, this death wish is also central to *The City and the Pillar*'s original, controversial ending among gay readers and critics: the murder of Bob by Jim as a response to having been called a "queer" by Bob. As philosophies of gay rights were developing following World War Two, the key to overcoming societal condemnation of homosexuality would be to overcome internalized self-hatred and begin to identify with one's sexuality—this would be the future of the gay rights movement, especially following the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969. In the decades prior, however, the question of creating a literary depiction of a gay figure without a death wish and without death as their fate moved writers such as Christopher Isherwood to encourage Vidal to consider unhinging gayness from literary tragedy. And indeed, reader responses to *City* also questioned the necessity of having Jim murder Bob at the end (Ibson 114-118). Later, Vidal would rewrite *The City and the Pillar*, considering this idea. Interestingly, however, by transforming the murder of Bob into a rape, he actually did not bid his conflicted conception farewell. Like Messala, and like Jim, Vidal could not let go of the past (Ibson 142).

RESPONSES TO THE *BEN-HUR* SUBTEXT: PRE-*CELLULOID CLOSET* "OUTING"

Given the centrality and intensity of the gay subplot in *Ben-Hur*, the question arises to what degree it was registered and appreciated by film audiences at the time of the film's release and in later decades. Three examples prior to the publication of Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* suggest the film would become the subject of various forms of homosexual parody, an effort to establish emotional distance from the implications of the subtext. These parodies rendered the gay subtext a joke, not unlike Gore Vidal's version in his memoirs. As a form of appreciation for the aesthetics of the performance, these responses are limited, but they are revealing in what they suggest about the public response to the subtext. All are meditations of sorts upon the text/subtext dynamic itself, its possibilities and parameters as a means of gay identification, intertextual homage, and irony. Particularly within the realm of humour defined as "camp," the text/subtext dynamic had long been central mode of cultural resistance to gay oppression (Meeker 81; Bérubé 86-87). But in the course of the 1960s and into the 1970s, the parodic responses to *Ben-Hur*'s gay subtext suggest that there had been a shift of sensibilities: a call of sorts to "out" such a subtext, to laugh at its necessity, and to highlight changes in audience attitudes about sexuality more generally.

An early response is *Ben Hurry*, produced by Richard Fontaine in 1961. It is a "gay-oriented short film…in which extras from the film take time out from shooting to undress each other and wrestle in flimsy G-strings. Parasitic on the success of *Ben-Hur*, Fontaine's film assured its audience that while the action on the screen of Hollywood Roman epics might be straight, queer activity was intimately close…" (Blanshard 257-58). One in a series of "physique" films, *Ben Hurry* is clearly more interested in the general connection between depictions of Ancient Rome and homoeroticism than it is in the relationships of specific characters. "Parasitic" or not, the film demonstrates the ways the "text/subtext" dynamic used in *Ben-Hur* could work effectively in other film genres as well that sought to appeal to gay audiences, but could also be camouflaged for straight audiences.

Another intriguing response to the subtext of *Ben-Hur* prior to Russo's work is a significant scene in one of Stephen Boyd's most enjoyable "Eurotrash" films from the early seventies: the Spanish/Italian co-production *Historia de una Traición* (English: *The Great Swindle*), co-starring Marisa Mell and Sylva Koscina. Perhaps best comparable to the classic heteroerotic thriller *The Swimming Pool*, with Alain Delon and Romy Schneider, *The Great Swindle*'s plot revolves around the two gorgeous high-end prostitutes, Carla and Nora, lethally outsmarting Arthur, the gorgeous con-man. During a key scene, the three attend a swinger party where the enigmatic Carla (Marisa Mell) has been hired to do a striptease. Immediately prior to this scene, we see two gay men at the party toasting each other in Ben-Hur/Messala modus, a direct homage to *Ben-Hur*. As the striptease progresses, we watch Arthur the con-man (Boyd) observing Carla's one-woman act about to become a two-woman show when Nora (Sylva Koscina), Carla's beautiful friend, tipsily and unexpectedly joins in—to Carla's dismay and Arthur's very evident enjoyment. The act is broken off by Carla, and Arthur, gallantly draping Nora's wrap over her exposed body, removes her from the scene. What Arthur the swindler does not get is that the two women are lovers, which is what does him in in the end. Thus, *The Great Swindle* introduces a lesbian "subtext" that the viewer is in on, but Arthur (Boyd), the quintessential subtextual gay man, is not.

The ultimately playful quality of *The Great Swindle*'s gay themes contrast sharply with the tragic high seriousness of the *Ben-Hur* subtext. In this sense, light years separate the 1959 epic from this forgotten 1971 homage, seen almost exclusively by Spanish and Italian audiences at the time of its release, until the second decade of the twenty-first century, when fans began uploading and moderately restoring various video versions of the film on *YouTube* (Scholz, "'Eurotrash'").

Just a few months prior to Stephen Boyd's death in 1977, the Canadian comedy program SCTV did a hilarious spoof of *Ben-Hur* in its entirety. Here, too, much of the humour was based upon the clear recognition of and parodying of the film's gay subtext. Gay themes appeared both in the spoof itself and in the "commercial breaks" in between, without ever being openly addressed by the shifty "host" of the screening, Moe (Harold

Ramis), who also happens to be playing "Mazola" (Messala) in the spoof; instead, he comments upon the film's stellar reputation and its pious themes, even telephoning later long distance with one "Paul Pope," who turns out to be "Pope Paul."

With regard to more private responses in the late 1950s and early 1960s, these are difficult to come by given the nature of the filmic medium in the mid-twentieth century. Stephen Boyd's fan mail (an estimated 4000 letters a week) following *Ben-Hur* would surely offer insights, if it were still available. Written responses to *The City and the Pillar* sent to Vidal after its publication suggest a gay male fan base in search of role models and emotional empathy (Ibson 114-120). But since the overt connection to Gore Vidal as co-author (with Christopher Fry) of the screenplay was not made public, viewers of *Ben-Hur* who had also been readers of *The City and the Pillar* could not have made the connection. The empathetic homoeroticism could have only been intuited from Stephen Boyd's characterization of Messala.

In an interview with a British fan magazine about his role in the film, Boyd responded to the interviewer's assertion that the character of Messala was a "villain," someone unworthy of audience identification:

> Messala just carried out orders…. He was a very good soldier—the sort of man who's regarded as a hero if he happens to be on the right side. As for the chariot race, people don't know what you need to do to be a charioteer. First of all, you have to be a murderer; then you have to be mean and vicious, determined to get there first by fair means or foul. If you do all this you *may* become a professional. Ben-Hur became a professional too, you know. Messala first tried to win the race by fair means; after that he was quite open about what he was doing. Besides, you would not find a more sympathetic reunion between two old friends in a modern story; nor would you find a more sincere relationship within a modern story. Without any basic change in his character, Messala could be seen as a hero; it has even been suggested as a possible interpretation. What I'm really saying is that I don't like black and white. I don't believe that there is any black and white—just human beings. ("Gone Hollywood?"/Stephen Boyd Blog)

The interviewer does not pursue the question of whose interpretation Boyd is speaking of, but it is not a stretch to imagine that—given *Ben-Hur*'s colourful production history—he could well have been talking about Gore Vidal.

After [Messala's] death, the main plot's effort to reconnect Judah to Esther, and so restore the heterosexual order, feels curiously unsatisfying for anyone who has been focusing upon the "feud" between Judah and Messala.

CONCLUSION

Scholars of gay cultural studies, such as Harry Thomas, situate Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* as a pioneering effort to "normalize homosexuality" by joining it to masculinity and disassociating it from femininity or the effeminate. In so doing, he made possible a more complex understanding—at the time—of gay desire.

But Vidal also did this quite unashamedly at the expense of effeminacy, that is, gay men who identified as feminine in order to attract men (Thomas 603, 606). This dynamic, I hope I have shown, is also central to *Ben-Hur*. Messala is utterly male-defined throughout the film and any effort to link him to heterosexuality is quickly side-stepped. After his death, the main plot's effort to reconnect Judah to Esther, and so restore the heterosexual order, feels curiously unsatisfying for anyone who has been focusing upon the "feud" between Judah and Messala. Popular American gossip columnist Hedda Hopper was not the only viewer who noticed this quality of the film when she wrote in her nationally syndicated column in 1960: "Messala was such a strong, vital character, and I've heard so many people say that when he died in 'Ben-Hur,' the picture was over" (Hopper *Hartford Courant*/Stephen Boyd Blog). The women's claim on the men is at no point depicted with the emotional intensity as is the relationship between Judah and Messala. What *Ben-Hur*—via Gore Vidal's contribution to the screenplay, Wyler's direction, Rozca's score, and Stephen Boyd's characterization of Messala—thus succeeded in doing was to aesthetically legitimize, through counterpoint performance, darkness, and light, the visual and aural expression of homosexual desire in mainstream Hollywood cinema, without irony, and without contempt. ▪

WORKS CITED

Altmann, Dennis. *Gore Vidal's America*. Polity, 2005.

Bérubé, Alan. *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II.* U of North Carolina P, 1990.

Barrios, Richard. *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall*. Routledge, 2003.

Ben-Hur. Directed by William Wyler, performances by Charlton Heston, Stephen Boyd, Haya Harareet. Turner Entertainment/ Warner Home Video, 1959.

Blanshard, Alistair J. L. "The Erotic Eye: Cinema, Classicism and the Sexual Subject." *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*, edited by Jennifer Ingleheart, Classical Presences, Oxford UP, 2015, pp. 252-272.

"Boyd gets few films in U.S." *Baltimore Sun*, 20 Dec. 1964, p. 67.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. BasicBooks, 1994.

Child, Ben. "Why has Hollywood put Ben-Hur back in the Closet?" *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/aug/17/ben-hur-remake-gore-vidal-charles-heston-gay.

Cieutat, Michel. "Petite Chronique d'un Talent Contrarié: Le cas Stephen Boyd." *Jeu d'acteurs: Corps et gestes au cinema*, edited by Christophe Damour, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2019, pp. 43-52.

Cushnan, Joe. *Stephen Boyd: From Belfast to Hollywood*. FeedaRead.com Publishing, 2013.

Devore, Gary. "'I'm Queer!,' 'No! I'm Queer': Hollywood Homosexuality and Roman Epic Films." *Popular Culture Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, February 1999, pp. 127-138.

Endres, Nikolai. "Sex and the City: Petronius' *Satyrica* and Gore Vidal's *The City & the Pillar*." *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*, edited by Jennifer Ingleheart, *Classical Presences*, Oxford UP, 2015, pp. 161-175.

"Gone Hollywood? I'm Proud of It!" Stephen Boyd interviewed by Elizabeth Hardie. *ABC Film Review* vol. 11, no. 10, October 1961, pp. 6-7.

Hansen, Will. "The Cold War and the Homophile, 1953-1963." *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, July 2019, pp. 79-96. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26926689

Hark, Ina Rae. "The Erotics of the Galley Slave: Male Desire and Christian Sacrifice in the 1959 Film Version of *Ben-Hur*." *Bigger Than Ben-Hur: The Book, its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*, edited by Barbara Ryan and Milette Shamir, Syracuse UP, 2016, pp. 162-178.

Heffernan, Harold. "Stephen Boyd Endures Agony for Art's Sake." *Toledo Blade*, 4 Dec. 1958.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Moveable Feast*. Bantam, 1965.

Hopper, Hedda. "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood." *Hartford Courant*, 1 July 1960, p. 30.

Ibson, John. *The Mourning After: Loss and Longing among Midcentury American Men*. U of Chicago P, 2018.

Ingleheart, Jennifer, editor. *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*. Classical Presences. Oxford UP, 2015.

Ingleheart, Jennifer. "Introduction: Romosexuality, Rome, Homosexuality, and Reception." *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*, edited by Jennifer Ingleheart, Oxford UP, 2015, 1-35.

Johnson, Erskine. "Actor Stephen Boyd Really Packs Wallop," *The Odessa American*, 19 Dec. 1959, p. 27.

Kozloff, Sarah. "Wyler's Wars." *Film History*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2008, pp. 456-473. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27670746.

Meeker, Martin. "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 10, no. 1, January 2001, pp. 78-116. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704790.

O'Donnell, Brenden. "Gore Vidal's Moral Program: Homophile Spirituality in *The City and the Pillar*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 61, no.1, 2019, pp. 49-71. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26778822.

Prock, Stephan. "Man to Man: Music and Masculine Relations in *Ben-Hur* (1925 and 1959)." *Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen*, edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, pp. 351-384.

Radford, Fiona. "Hollywood Ascendant: *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*." *Companion to Ancient Greece and Rome on Screen*, edited by Arthur J. Pomeroy, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, pp. 119-144.

Russo, Vito. *The Celluloid Closet*: *Homosexuality in the Movies*. (Revised Ed.) Harper and Row, 1987. [1981]

Scholz, Anne-Marie. '"Eurotrash" Films, Hollywood, and the Possibilities and Limits of YouTube as a Media Archive for Popular European Film History'. *EuropeNow* 43 (September 2021). https://www.europenowjournal.org/2021/09/13/eurotrash-films-hollywood-and-the-possibilities-and-limits-of-youtube-as-a-media-archive-for-popular-european-film-history/

---. *From Fidelity to History: Film Adaptations as Cultural Events in the Twentieth Century*. Berghahn Books, 2013.

Stephen Boyd Blog: Belfast-born Hollywood and International Star from 1950s to 1970s Fan Tribute Page. https://stephenboydblog.wordpress.com/

Szczerbakiewicz, Rafal. "Down Eros, Up Mars! The Post-Masculine in William Wyler's Films." *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1-18. https://doi.org/10.31261/SSP.2020.15.09. (orig. in Polish)

Thomas, Harry. "'Immaculate Manhood': *The City and the Pillar*, *Giovanni's Room,* and the Straight–Acting Gay Man." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2013, pp. 596-618. https://www.jstor.org/stable/24246956.

Tuszynski, Susan. "A Cold War Cautionary Tale: Heterosexuality and Ideology in William Wyler's Ben-Hur." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2006, pp. 116-122. doi:10.3200/JPFT.34.3.116-122.

Vidal, Gore. *Palimpsest: A Memoir*. Abacus, 1996.

Vidal, Gore. *The City and the Pillar.* New American Library, 1950. [3rd Print. 1955] https://archive.org/details/citypillar00vida/mode/2up

Wallace, Lew. *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. Harper & Brothers, 1880.