

## Comentarios de Películas / Film Reviews

**Rome.** Apted, Michael; Farino, Julia; Coulter, Allen; Poul, Alan; Van Patten, Tim; Shill, Steve; Podeswa, Jeremy; Taylor, Alan and Salomon, Mikael (DIRS.); HBO/BBC (Prod.); Heller, Bruno; Milius, John; Frankel, David; Macdonald, William J.; Cunningham, Alexandra and Hodges, Adrian (SCRIPT). United Kingdom, 2005: SON., COL.

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It might seem unusual to review a subject belonging to the faraway world of Antiquity in a contemporary history journal, but when one considers that the object of interest is the historical prototype of a dictatorial leader, as well as the fact that it concerns a modern time tv-series destined to be broadcast around the world, this first impression is somewhat altered: by adapting the life of Julius Caesar, the makers of 'Rome' have, even if maybe not willing to do so, appropriated a part of the past to the present. 'Rome' tells the story of Gaius Julius Caesar, from just before his passing the river Rubicon until his untimely death in 44 b.C. It is however not just the story of one man, but that of a nation evolving: expanding militarily but at the same time longing for peace and room to breathe. In this climate of powerlessness of the old ruling class (the Senate and those surrounding Pompey) and the steady, although slow and difficult, rise to power of the Roman masses (the plebs), old values were substituted by new ones, old certainties disappeared and made way for a new society. This was a very promising, critical period in the history of Rome. Leaders were now more than ever subject to popular acclaim, which put the masses at the centre of politicians' concerns, as obtaining the favour of the masses was often decisive. Julius Caesar was the quintessential populist leader, swaying the masses into being ruled. Steadily, he enforced

his grip on the people of Rome, becoming dictator and maybe even hoping to be king one day. The life and deeds of Caesar present a perfect example of a recurrent phenomenon in human history: the willingness of the masses to be ruled, and the eventually nearly always unavoidable forced death of the authoritarian ruler, victim to his own megalomania, or, in Latin, *superbia*. As such, the figure of Caesar can count as the prototype and prefiguration of many later political leaders, especially those who will use the masses as the base for their, in various degrees exclusive, claims to power. To give but one clear example: the dictator of Italian fascism, Benito Mussolini, declared on various accounts that the only real example he drew from the past was... Caesar.

The first episode starts at the Battle of Alesia (52 b.C.), after which Gallic king Vercingetorix was taken prisoner and the whole of Gaul finally brought under Roman control. The fighting and ultimate victory of Caesar are less central than the story of the two soldiers we will encounter in the following episodes: Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo. It is mainly from the point of view of their story that the civil war between Caesar and Pompey is told, thus offering the spectator a fine look on daily life in ancient Rome, focusing on the higher as well as on the lower classes. We also get a quite accurate depiction of the politics of the times, which were still –for a short while– predominantly the business of the upper, senatorial, class. In so doing, the first episode prefigures the strength and backbone of this whole series: historical both on a high and a lower, popular level. It is clear from the beginning that the centrepiece will be Caesar, but the protagonist is never portrayed in a one-sidedly positive manner, as the makers of 'Rome' highlight the future dictator's generousness as well as for example his excessive pride and the selfishness inherent to a leader who seeks to rule large parts of the known world.

The second episode then prepares the great conflict between Caesar, the new man, and Pompey, a relic and representative of the old ruling class, even if he himself also has popular origins and was a 'new man' one day. The scene shifts to Rome and illustrates the homecoming, after nearly eight years, of the two legionnaires. The viewer is not only confronted with the problems involving a marriage that was put on hold for eight years, but also gets a good idea of dayly (and night-) life in ancient Rome. The parallel storyline is the attempt by the rather vulgar but loyal Marc Anthony to negotiate Caesar's immunity, which in the end fails. This results in the final scene, the crossing of the Rubicon, the official start of Caesar's March on Rome and of the civil war.

The third chapter begins and ends with Caesar's scouts rapidly approaching the capital, in the end retrieving the gold Pompey had taken from the treasury. In an incisive fashion, the viewer gets a good idea of one of the main conflicts causing the civil war: the contrast between the old political ruling class, desperately holding on to power and common law, and emerging, 'charismatic' political forces, which were 'revolutionary' in the sense that they didn't play the game according to the rules, to legal procedures. Herein lies the great power and attraction of Caesar: he represents hope and action and, paradoxically not at all in a legal way, the promise of change and basic justice. An unexpected changing of the guards is at hand, and the senatorial oligarchy is taken aback by its swiftness. Even if he is at the centre of attention, Caesar is not an unquestionable, 'clean' hero: in private he appears calculated, proud and egocentric, especially when put next to his at the same time friend and nemesis, the conscientious Brutus. Thus, from the very beginning the possibility of Caesar's eventual downfall is evoked. On a higher level, a more universal message is conveyed, as the example of Caesar's rise and fall will inevitably lead to the somewhat 'positivist' conclusion that the attribution of political power should be the result of honest, to a certain extent 'democratic' elections, an idea of course more linked to present-day political theories than it was a political reality in Antiquity.

While the former episode focused on the contrast between the two political factions, the next one moves to another level and shifts between (cae-

sarian) politics and the life of the popular classes. The viewer gets a good insight of the way in which Caesar, who presented himself as the only representative of the people, from the very beginning had to deal with the classical problems of politics, namely bribes and 'networking'. In a parallel way, the scenes from the lives of the lower classes, more specifically those involving legionnaires Vorenus and Pullo, show how the political change may have seemed 'revolutionary', but had little or no directly positive effect –except for fear and uncertainty- on the lower social classes.

The fifth chapter then prepares the beginning of the hostilities which will lead to the end of Pompey's life, as it starts and ends with a focus on the latter's more and more precarious situation. The episode itself presents many themes, as the storyline is quite multidirectional. One aspect is the recurrent theme of the preparation of Octavian, Caesar's heir and eventual successor, by his mother Atia. The love theme is introduced by the episode of legionnaire Pullo falling in love with a slave woman and by Caesar's passion for noblewoman Servilia, whom he will eventually repudiate for political reasons. The fate of Servilia illustrates the pettiness of Roman high society as well as, in general, the tragedy of (aristocratic) women in ancient Rome: even if there is reason to believe they sometimes had considerable influence on their husbands and lovers, such cases were rare, as women's fate was never certain, and their legal position weak. This counted even more so for slaves, male as well as female, as can be seen in the episode where legionnaire Vorenus, who has put his hopes in slave trade, loses nearly all of his slaves to a mortal disease. The loss is not seen as human loss, but as the loss of a lucrative investment, causing the struggling centurion to re-inlist in the army...

The sixth episode is in many ways one of the less interesting ones. First of all, the storyline is quite weak, as the whole chapter focuses on Marc Anthony in Rome, awaiting Caesar's call to arms in order to fight Pompey's armies in Greece. The whole fifty minutes are filled with the stories of Marc Anthony, who will try to succeed Caesar after his death, and those of young Octavian, future opponent of Marc Anthony, and his mother Atia. The latter's importance seems exaggerated throughout the whole series, on the one hand for narrative

reasons, that is so as to act as a counterweight to other noble female protagonists such as Servilia and plebeian women such as Vorenus's wife Nio-be, on the other hand to put the in reality still quite meaningless Octavian, future emperor Augustus, in the picture. In so doing, the makers of 'Rome' have given in to the laws of their medium, as they produce an episode with lots of 'colour' (the role of Attia) but only minor and in a sense 'autotelical' historical content: in moving Marc Anthony and above all Octavian (and especially his mother) to the forefront, not only their importance in Caesar's struggle seems to be exaggerated, but in this way the possibility of a followup series centered around these two characters is already prepared.

The following episode largely makes up for the above mentioned flaws, as it takes us to the final blow inflicted to Pompey, first on the battlefields of Pharsalus (48 b.C.), then at his arrival in Egypt (the closing scene). It is the merit of the directors to not openly choose sides in the conflict. Even more so, they even depict Pompey and his side (Cato, Scipio, Brutus and to a minor extent Cicero) as men who are driven by an idea and goal: the respect for the Roman Republic and its institutions. On the other hand, the motives propelling Caesar never come to the forefront, even seem quite inexistent, apart from his hunger for power and excessive pride. Pompey is the beaten old man, supported by what is left of the legal representatives of the Roman State; Caesar is the conqueror who, even if remarkably lenient on his defeated opponents, acts out of a Machiavellian sort of pragmatism. His pride and love of power move him, not the greater interest of Rome, so it seems. This quite negative image will however slightly be altered in the following episode...

The eighth episode is situated in Egypt, where Pompey was murdered upon his arrival. Arriving in Egypt, Caesar is offered the head of his enemy by the child-king Ptolemy, causing his rage and indignation. The episode stands somewhat apart, as it gives an account of a specific local intervention of Caesar's, leading to the reign of Cleopatra, for some time mistress of Caesar's and mother of his (or legionnaire Pullo's?) son Caesarion. Cleopatra has often been depicted as a quite mysterious, exotic figure, as has indeed the whole of the house of the Ptolemies. Not much is known of her, which

has often led to interpretations of her role as being totally subordinate to Caesar, her character being that of the luxurious, oriental style queen. This is also the case in 'Rome', but it is the merit of the makers of the series that they have left her with a certain autonomy, as well as a form of political intelligence. In so doing, the at first quite negative, stereotypical image of Egypt offered by the figure of the ruling child-king (whose degeneration is personified by his counsellors) is softened and refined by the strong role of his sister and spouse Cleopatra. The only weakness is the fact that, apart from episode eight, nor Cleopatra nor her son re-appear in the following episodes.

The ninth episode begins with the defeat of what is left of the old Roman senatorial class, represented by Cato and Scipio, who both commit suicide after the Battle of Thapsus (46 b.C.). From now on, there are two storylines in 'Rome': the story of legionnaires Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus, who will eventually become a newly appointed caesarean senator, and the story of Caesar and Brutus who, under the influence of his mother Servilia, as well as in the name of the Republic (Cassius, Cicero,...), will eventually become Caesar's principal assassin. 'Rome' is a series consisting of twelve episodes, but episodes nine to twelve could as well have been reduced to half their size, as only few purely historical notes are added. However, the series becomes interesting from the point of view of an increasing interest in popular life, as the story of the two protagonists Vorenus and Pullo and those surrounding them (slaves, family...) offers a good sketch of daily life in ancient Rome. The political story moves somewhat to the background, as the makers of the series offer a more intimate look in the everyday life in Rome. These scenes serve as background for the continuing political dilemma, which will eventually result in the murder of Caesar by a group of eminent senators. 'Rome' ends with the death of Caesar, stabbed to death on the Ides of March, 44 b.C.

Overall, we can say that 'Rome' is a very successful effort to dust off Antiquity and render it actual and accessible to a broader public. The main theme being of a universal kind, i.e. authoritarian dictatorship versus egalitarian bureaucracy (or at least the illusion of it), 'Rome' seems to offer the choice between these two, in our opinion pushing

towards the second, as the death of Caesar at the end functions as ominous reminder of the dangers of concentrating too much power in the hands of one man and, on a larger scale, one nation. 'Rome' also offers an in a way 'modern' look on Antiquity, as it touches upon themes to the front which only recently have attracted the attention of historians of many historical periods: the fate of the lower classes (including slaves) and above all that of women –cf. the growing discipline of so-called 'gender' studies- gets as much space as the 'greater' story, that is as the political content. In this way, 'Rome'

offers a balanced mix of very diverse aspects of life in Antiquity, and therefore deserves much acclaim. The only weakness are some concessions done to the specific laws of the tv medium (the excessive importance of Atia and her son Octavian, as well as the fact that the last four episodes tend to be a bit too soap opera like), but be that as it may, after seeing 'Rome' we eagerly await a followup series. 'Rome' is a highly deserving effort to represent and rethink a very important and influential period in the history of Antiquity.