

THE RECEPTION OF ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA IN THE CINEMA: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE UNIVERSE OF WRITING IN MOTION AND ITS ARTISTIC-LITERARY ANCESTORS¹

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Abstract

This brief study intends to analyse the way Mesopotamia was received in 20th century North-American and European cinema, having in mind its multiple artistic and literary influences. Through short and feature films produced essentially in the decades of 1910, 1920, 1950, and 1960, important characters and episodes associated to ancient Babylonia and Assyria will be carefully analysed. This study will have in mind the fact that cinema is not strange to other forms of visual and literary expression, collecting from these different elements. Amongst such influences are paintings by Pieter Bruegel, Gustave Doré or John Martin, and literary compositions by Voltaire, Pietro Metastasio or Lord Byron. On the other side, cinema was also dependent from its own socio-political context, being the movies produced intimately connected with its own social and ideological contours. This are the aspects we propose to analyse here.

Keywords

Movies; Babylon; Assyria; Sardanapalus; Babel Tower.

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Resumo

Este breve estudo pretende analisar a forma como a antiga Mesopotâmia foi recebida no cinema norte-americano e europeu do séc. XX, tendo em conta as suas múltiplas influências artísticas e literárias. Através de curtas e longas metragens, sobretudo das décadas de 10, 20, 50 e 60 da passada centúria, analisar-se-ão algumas das personagens e episódios mais importantes que foram retratados nas telas cinematográficas referentes à Assíria e Babilónia. O estudo terá em conta o facto de o cinema não ser alheio a outras formas de expressão visual ou literária, recolhendo destas vários elementos. De entre as suas influências, destacam-se os quadros de Pieter Bruegel, Gustave Doré ou John Martin, ou as composições literárias de Voltaire, Pietro Metastasio ou Lord Byron. Por outro lado, o cinema também não foi alheio ao seu próprio contexto sociopolítico, estando os filmes produzidos intimamente dependentes dos seus contornos sociais e ideológicos. São aspectos como estes que propomos analisar.

Palavras-chave

Filmes; Babilônia; Assíria; Sardanápalo; Torre de Babel.

It was at the end of the nineteenth century that the then neologism Kinétographe (cinematographer), which gave name to an invention by Thomas Edison³ that would change the world of the arts, emerged based on two words from the ancient Greek lexicon. Combining the terms “movement” and “writing”, not only a new word was created but also a completely new visual and artistic universe, which was, until the invention of television, the most popular and the responsible media for bringing antiquity back to life during a long time. In fact, we could say that the very birth of cinema is closely associated with the ancient world, being one of its most appreciated genres, since its early days, historical reconstructions, many of them set in Eastern or Greco-Roman antiquity (Michelakis and Wyke, 2013: 6; Bertellini, 2014: 11).

The past was the ideal vehicle for expressing the political, religious and social anxieties and demands that preoccupied contemporary society. Through an identification with the societal phenomena of a long time ago, the spectators' sensibility was appealed, creating a symmetry between the daily lives of the past and those of the present. In cinema, as in other forms of artistic or literary expression, Antiquity was a metaphor, it was an analogy, it was a hyperbole, and it was an understatement, captivating the eyes and reflections of theater spectators. As an example, it would suffice to mention that the American production of 1953 *Slaves of Babylon*, launched after the Second World War and the creation of the State of Israel, displays on the screen the adversities endured by the Jews during the great war conflict of the 20th century equating them to the ones that were suffered by the people of Judah during the captivity of Babylon, in the period of Nebuchadnezzar II. Very symptomatic of this identification is the insertion, in the garments of the captives who lived in the capital of the Euphrates, of the famous Star of David, a symbol associated with the martyrdom of the Jews in the past century. In this way, temporal discrepancies were canceled and the Antiquity became contemporary.

In fact, in a study that intends, like the present one, to analyze the way in which Mesopotamian antiquity was received in cinema, it is not enough just to understand the most immediate aspect of that reception (the image) but also its entire sociological environment (the message). The film met both the design of its producers, as well as the expectations that they

³ Léon G. Bouly coined the term in 1892 (Michelakis e Wyke, 2013: 9).

established for their viewers and the reactions that it aroused in the last, stimulating sensitivities, provoking attitudes⁴. By this we mean that, once imposed, the film took on a life of its own, reflecting the taste and interpretation of its observers. Furthermore, we must take into account that the substance of that image and that message, i.e., the narrative (visual, discursive) contained in the film, was the result of a long constructive process. In other words, the narrative was built on a significant set of many other narratives that had been formed over decades or centuries, in a wide and diffuse space-time universe. Before reaching the viewer, it had already been subject to other sensitivities and raised other identities. Indeed, what is Babylon but an indiscernible web of history and myth, a bundle of ideas and overlapping notions established in a scattered *longue durée*? Is it not the Babylon from *Slaves of Babylon* (1953) the one that came to us through the Old Testament account?⁵ Moreover, does this not constitute a look over the *other*, a narrative, an idea, a fantasy, a discourse?

This aspect is more than noticeable with regard to the reception of Mesopotamia in the cinematographic world. Indeed, in the way the Mesopotamian civilization – whose physical and linguistic records were only accessed in the middle of the 19th⁶ century – was received, a palimpsestic phenomenon of conceptions and perceptions, of intersections and interconnections, of syncretisms and osmoses, transpires. This process started long ago during the first millennium BC, since the remote classic era, with the famous historian of Halicarnassus. Some leading characters in cinematographic films emerged precisely with Greek historians, being the target of different adaptations, recreations and appropriations over the subsequent centuries. Semiramis and Sardanapalus, which we will deal with later, are an example of this.

⁴ According to Martindale, reception presupposes the active participation of the reader (i.e., the viewer), outlining it in two complementary ways, with the present and the past in constant dialogue (2007: 298).

⁵ The film is based on the account of the Book of Daniel, which places Balthazar on the throne when Babylon is defeated by the army of the Achaemenid king Cyrus, the Great.

⁶ This fact is important in the sense that, until Paul-Émile Botta started excavations in Khorsabad in 1842, nothing was really known about ancient Mesopotamia except through reports by third parties. It was the first excavations in Assyria that gave a concrete image to the Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations and granted them their own voice for the first time.

Taking these aspects into account, we then started the study and analysis of some of the main films that looked at the millennial country “between the rivers”⁷.

Emigrating from the East ...⁸

As could be expected, many of the cinematic reconstructions about ancient Mesopotamia are based on the biblical narrative. Along with the Greco-Roman authors, the Old Testament was one of the main sources for the knowledge of ancient Babylon and Assyria before the rediscovery of the mid-19th century. Nevertheless, despite the architectural and philological findings and the exhumation of antiquities during the 19th century, the new image of Mesopotamia that then emerged would not be able to compete with the centuries of reception that had flowed and echoed through those two vehicles (ie the Bible and the Classics). Thus, at the end of the 20th century, the narratives about Mesopotamian culture, as cinema shows so well, would continue to be based on texts from ancient Greece and Rome, on the Old Testament narrative or on literary productions (dramatic plays, librettos) that were built upon these.

The Tower of Babel

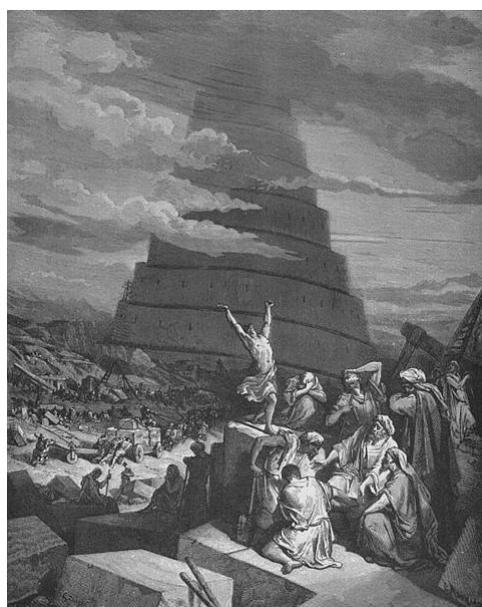
One of the most significant episodes depicted on cinema screens at the beginning of the past century was the famous tower of Babel, reported in the Book of Genesis. According to the narrative, emigrating from the East, the post-diluvium survivors would have started the construction of a tower, which intended to reach the heavens, dominion par excellence of the monotheistic god. Could the old nomenclature of the true tower of Babel, that is, the Babylonian ziggurat, dedicated to the national god Marduk and called E.temen.an.ki, “the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth” appear in this ambition? In the Mesopotamian metaphysical conception, the building was intended to be a link between the earthly and divine domains, something seen as natural within the mentality of the time. The Bible turned this reality into an attack on Yahweh, who, consequently, condemned its builders to disorder and Babylon to

⁷ The Greek nomenclature “between the rivers”, adopted to designate the Tigris and the Euphrates, was also used by some Mesopotamian rulers, as is the case with Šamši-Adad I.

⁸ Gn. 11, 2.

confusion – from the Hebrew *Balal*. We must highlight the *balal-babel* linguistic game⁹.

Cinema, relying not only on this narrative but also on the paintings and engravings that art offered, especially during the 16th to 19th centuries, presented to the spectators its own vision of the mythical tower. We cannot effectively dissociate the early days of cinema from other forms of art, such as painting and photography¹⁰. With regard to our study, the similarities between the painting by the French illustrator Gustave Doré, *La Confusion des Langues* (1868), and the post-World War I Italian film *La Sacra Bibbia* (1920) (figures 1 and 2) are notorious (figs. 1 and 2), or between the painting by Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, entitled *La Tour de Babel* (1563), and the North American film *Noah's Ark* (1928) (figs. 3 and 4). What is important to keep in mind is that both visual representations of 1868 and 1563 already had their own sociological constraints.



Figures 1 and 2: *La Confusion des Langues* de Gustave Doré (1868); Still from the movie *La Sacra Bibbia* (1920), from Pier Antonio Gariazzo and Armando Vey.

⁹ *babel*, or in akkadian *bābilim* (in Sumerian *ká.dingir.ra*) meant "the door of the god".

¹⁰ Cinema appears as a continuation of other artistic forms, as a technological progress in a long line of scientific developments, such as lithography or photography. The early days of cinema are closely associated with art, its producers often seeking influences in paintings, sculptures and the like. On the other hand, it is also linked to literature, deriving most of the melodramas represented on the screens from successful literary classics and narratives (Brotons Capó, 2014: 13 and ss).



Figures 3 and 4: *La Tour de Babel* from Pieter Bruegel, the Elder (1563); *Still* from the movie *Noah's Ark* (1928) from Michael Curtiz.

In fact, on Pieter Bruegel's canvas, the Genesis building, a monumental memory of a long time ago, stands on a backdrop that represents nothing less than the Antwerp of the painter's century (McCall, 1998: 189). The intertwining of the past and the present, between antiquity and contemporaneity, is a characteristic of Modern and Contemporary art that we see emerging in different artistic schools and which intends in a way to alert to the dangers of moral decay - the current world could succumb just like the old one. As far as Bruegel is concerned, not only the buildings, the houses, the mills and the port are clearly of modern influence but also the clothes of Nimrod¹¹ and his entourage. The Old Testament king may even evoke the figure of Philip II of Spain (Montero Fenollós, 2010: 160), who is together with his troops, equipped with spears, at a time when Europe was witnessing the effects of the Reformation. Bruegel thus outlined a criticism of Habsburg control. In this sense, one can also understand the appearance of the Tower, whose structure is in everything similar to that of the ancient Roman amphitheatres. Northern Europe had, at this point, made sinful Babylon a synonym for the Roman Church. Nothing more natural, then, than the Tower of the first being represented as the old coliseum implanted in the papal city.

¹¹ About Nimrod, responsible for the construction of the tower, see below.



Figure 5: Stephen Boyd as Nimrod in the movie *The Bible: In the Beginning...* (1966).



Figure 6: Still from the movie *Metropolis* (1927).

Therefore, what arrives at the cinema in *Noah's Ark* (1928) is already a reception of a reception of a reception, which cannot forget the long historical and cultural current of interpretations that underlies it. The same could be said of *The Bible: In the beginning...* (1966), a film made by John Huston, which intends to be a moving narrative of the first part of the Book of Genesis. Central character in the segment where the Tower of Babel is evoked is Nimrod, the perfidious king who forces a slave population to work on his ambitious building. As in the representations mentioned above, the moral – and we must not forget that the cinema always serves a

moral (Lapeña Marchena, 2011: 10) – is centred on the immense pride and self-destruction to which it leads.

The mention of Nimrod in the Book of Genesis as the first great figure associated in some way with Mesopotamia is of particular importance. However, it is authors such as Philo of Alexandria or Flavius Josephus who transform Nimrod into the great leader of the tower's construction and even into a supernatural being, identifying him with a giant, the first among men: "he was a giant against God, which thus declare the opposition of such beings to the deity" (Philo, HQ, II.82). Later, literature would become interested in this character and the giant with his bow would incorporate mythological literary themes from Dante to Victor Hugo. In *La Princesse de Babylone*, a fable composed by Voltaire in 1768, it is the weapon of this true king, his insignia of power, transformed into a kind of Excalibur, which would guarantee the success of anyone who managed to tame it. This is how the French philosopher describes it: "This Nemrod, a valiant hunter in the eyes of the Lord, had left a bow of seven Babylonian feet in height, carved in ebony harder than the iron of Mount Caucasus (...); and no mortal, after Nemrod, was able to handle the wonderful bow" (Voltaire, 2008: 8). Later, Hugo also reflected on his power, emphasizing instead the sin that was committed with his weapon: "Nemrod eleves l'arc au-dessus de sa tête; le cable lâché fit bruit d'une tempête, et, comme un éclair meurt quand on ferme les yeux, l'effrayant javelot disparait dans le cieux" (Hugo, 1886: 83).

It is the arrow launched by Nimrod towards the heavens, as evidenced by Hugo, which points out the heretic king's defiant attitude towards divine power (Fig. 5). The bow symbolizes the affront committed by secular power against the monotheistic god and, in parallel, his doom. In short, what arrives at the cinema is not a copy of the biblical account, but rather the composite plot woven over centuries and centuries. And it is this clew that is presented to the audience of spectators. The Nimrod of *The Bible: In the beginning ...* (1966) finds a kind of alter ego in the inventor of *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang. With arms raised in an expression of his authority and greed, he contemplates the creation of the *new* tower of Babel, an allegory to the futuristic work of this dystopian society, where it is intended to assert the power of technocrats over a slave and automaton society (Fig. 6). The metaphor is obvious: pride and unbridled ambition lead to the dissolution of understanding and the subsequent tension between corrupt and targets of corruption. We cannot, moreover, forget the concerns of the 1920s of the past century, when *Metropolis* (1927) was produced, in the aftermath of the First World War, with the technological advances and the

death toll they could cause. In addition, what about concerns about the new societal challenges in this time of reconstitution? This whole sociological scenario was thus well moulded in the films for the delight and reflection of Western audiences.

Babylon and the Book of Daniel episodes

In addition to the Book of Genesis, cinema focused mainly on the account of the Prophet Daniel. There are several episodes represented in the cinematographic creations produced throughout the 20th century: the madness of Nebuchadnezzar, the feast of Balthasar, the fall of Babylon and the punishment in the lions' den. Daniel is a central character to all these events, either as spectator or protagonist, although on cinema screens he only appears in some films; on the others only the words he pronounced in his book are taken as background to the story. *Slaves of Babylon* (1953) is one of the films that lives up to its story, incorporating the first verses of the Book, which lead to the fall of the city of Babylon at the hands of Cyrus, the Great. As we said, Babylonian captivity is equated with Jewish martyrdom during Nazism and Fascism, just as it has been in relation to so many other historical episodes. Who does not remember the famous *Va, pensiero*, the melodious Jewish chorus of the opera *Nabucco*, composed by Giuseppe Verdi in 1842? As in the 1953 film, captivity cancels temporal disparities, creating a connection between the past and the recent present; also in the 18th century *Va, pensiero* quickly became a veritable anthem of the Italian Risorgimento and the struggle for a unified Italy, free from dominion of foreign powers like the Habsburgs¹².

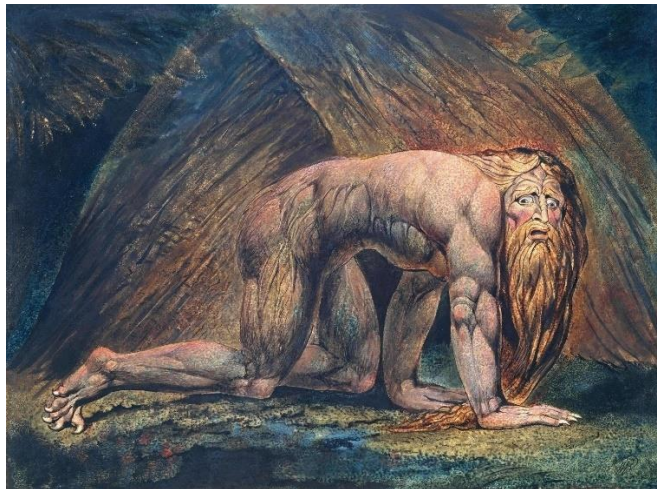
Nabucco and *Slaves of Babylon* (1953) also have in common the episode of the madness of Nebuchadnezzar II, which is related to us in the following step: «Nebuchadnezzar: he was removed from among men and grazed grass like oxen; his body was soaked by the dew of the sky, his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle, and his nails like the nails of birds »¹³. The curious episode, however, finds no parallel in Mesopotamian sources and may be associated not with this monarch, but with his successor Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon. In fact, is it not the latter that is described in the cuneiform Verse Account as someone who “utter blasphemy” (Beaulieu, 2007: 162) and carries out “unholy action” (ANET:

¹² *Nabucco* reflects on the stage the spirit of the Italian nationalist movement (Ni Ma, 2018).

¹³ Dn. 4, 30.

286)? Blasphemous actions against the gods and the population could only be perpetrated by someone lacking mental insight. Moreover, this would be none other than Nabonidus. By transferring, in the Book of Daniel, the supposed illness of Nabonidus¹⁴ to the infamous Nebuchadnezzar, it was possible to attribute to him a divine punishment worthy of his actions and to conclude his cycle of misfortune. For the Old Testament, it was convenient for the monarch responsible for the captivity of the Jews to have insanity comparable to his perfidy.

Repeatedly addressed in multiple artistic expressions over the centuries, Nebuchadnezzar's madness knows one of his most notorious manifestations in the painting of the English painter William Blake (Fig. 7), where the king presents himself naked, with long beards and hair, a careless body, a countenance that denounces all his terror and alienation and a pose that shows his familiarity with the animal world. In *Slaves of Babylon* (1953), it is Leslie Bradley who is in charge of giving body to the Mesopotamian monarch. In one of the most odd scenes in the film, Nebuchadnezzar harvests and tastes “grass like the oxen”¹⁵ in his garden, leaning on his hands and knees as befits a human who has just lost his identity (Fig. 8).



Figures 7 and 8: *Nebuchadnezzar* from William Blake (1795 a c. 1805); *Nebuchadnezzar II* feeding on herbs from his garden in *Slaves of Babylon* (1953).

¹⁴ According to the Dead Sea Scroll known as the *Prayer of Nabonidus*, the king had a disease that had disfigured him.

¹⁵ Dn. 4, 30.

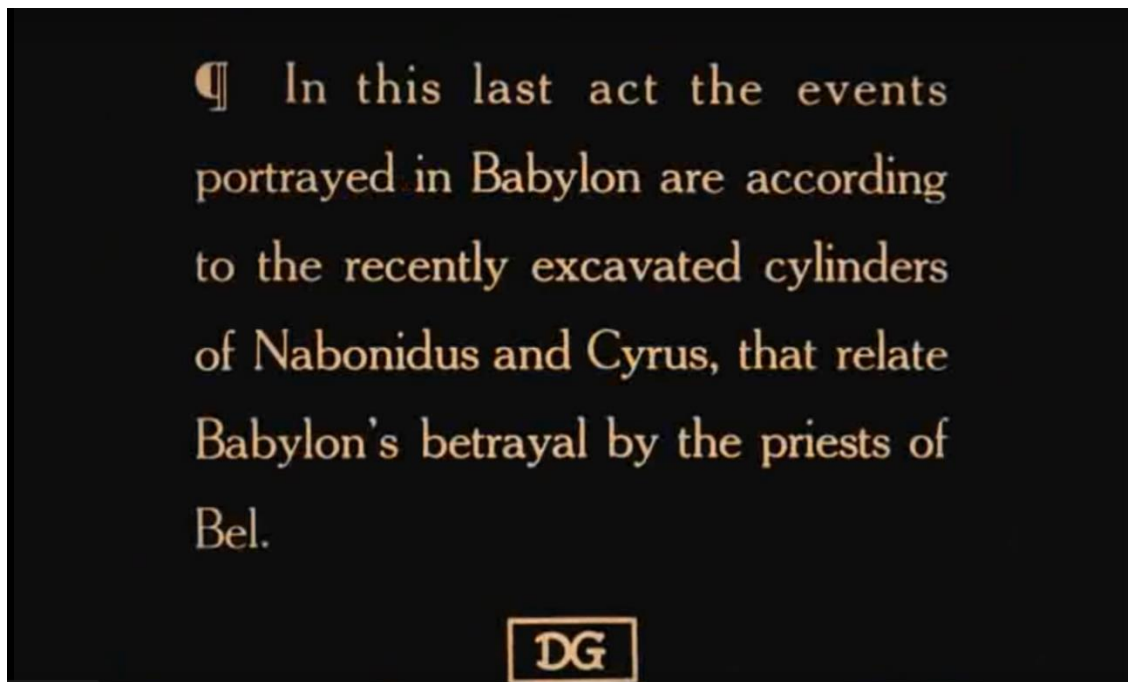


Figure 9: Intertitle of *Intolerance* (1916) from David W. Griffith.

The Bible and Daniel also made mistakes in placing Balthazar on the throne when Cyrus the Great took Babylon. Although we know that Nabonidus, the last sovereign of Babylon (c. 555-539 BC), have been absent from the capital of his empire for many years, remaining in the oasis of Teima and handing over to his son, Balthasar, the regency, we also know, through the available sources, that he would be on the throne of the city in his final moments. The monarch's return to the capital had occurred years before the city's final fall in the year 539 BC. The curious thing is that the epic film *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages* (1916), directed by the "father" of North American cinema, David W. Griffith, use as a source, judging by the intertitles (Fig. 9), the famous Cyrus Cylinder, which refers to "He handed over to him [Cyrus] Nabonidus, the king who did not fear him"¹⁶, but ignore this historical information. Indeed, the ingredients were all gathered so that *Intolerance* (1916) presented a minimally faithful portrait of the last days of Babylon. However, another story would

¹⁶

Irving

Finkel,

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=327188&partId=1 . Consulted in August 2019. Likewise, the *Chronicle of Nabonidus* refers to the fact that Cyrus invaded the city after a withdrawal of Nabonidus from the recently conquered town of Sippar, located to the north.

eventually overlap with the facts referred to in the Cyrilus of Cyrus and Nabonidus and in all other cuneiform testimonies - the Old Testament.

There is, however, an element of novelty in Griffith's film. Right at the beginning of the movie, that is, in the part corresponding to the Babylonian episode, Balthasar receives the title of "apostle of tolerance", ascribing to him with the image of a vigilante and protector. Therefore, the roles are reversed. Cyrus, who normally has the role of liberator, is now the ruthless attacker; Balthasar the orderly prince, victim of an ultimate betrayal. What did Griffith intend with this vision? After the attack that the director suffered, accused of racism and prejudice due to the film he released the previous year, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), his idea was to counter this image, asserting himself as a forgiving and tolerant person. The accusations against him were thus defended on the screen, and it is possible that the director collected and displayed some of his history in the film's argument. Being Cyrus the foreigner, the one who came from abroad to claim the city, the most natural thing would be, that in strategy and character, he would be the aggressor. On the other hand, although the "reputation" of the Mesopotamian capital was, through the Old Testament and based on Daniel, quite negative, Griffith had chosen to gild his Babylon, which had asked of him so much dedication, granting it the role of martyr, succumbing to the hands of an implacable sovereign. Thus, in *Intolerance* (1916), the population of the city welcomes Cyrus, following his victory, however, no trace of contentment or idea of liberation is seen in this attitude, but of mere resignation. It was, in essence, the Babylon of excesses, delights and possibilities that the director intended to exalt.

For a theme as fruitful as intolerance, the director chose, nothing more and nothing less, than one of the most celebrated empires in human history. Babylon hovered in the imagination of western man, so timeless and eternal that its history was confused with time itself. Babylon was back in the origins, the place where, in the post-diluvium context, the Tower of Babel, a symbol of the dispersion of peoples, had been built. The choice of this mythical city as a backdrop for a plot like *Intolerance* (1916) seems to make sense not only for its dimension but also for the situation that was then experienced. The fog that had settled over Europe with World War I threatened to spread across borders, submerging the world in apocalyptic chaos. Misunderstood, criticized and surrounded by a society divided by social conflicts, Griffith decided to alternate the crucifixion of Christ and the massacre of the Huguenots (other episodes portrayed in this same film) with an equally striking story and capable of provoking the viewer's involvement. Babylon, an inseparable part of the Judeo-Christian identity

legacy, could perfectly correspond to the director's expectations. The end, the ultimate consequence of the intolerance of the human being, a scenario that the film intended to portray, was therefore sought in what constituted a defining and cathartic moment in the history of mankind as portrayed in the Old Testament - the fall of the Babylonian empire and its capital.

In *Intolerance* (1916) we can see one of the reconstructions of Babylon that took more dedication. The detailed research carried out by Griffith and his team is exposed in his famous scrapbook, where clippings, photographs and various information demonstrate the attention that was given when recreating the capital of the Euphrates. The monumental film, which used thousands of extras for its most famous scenes, was based on various artistic, literary and scientific sources and intended to alert to the problems of contemporary society due to excessive intolerance. If we take into consideration the fact that the most expensive scenario, the famous court of the Babylonian monarch Balthasar, was shaped in the likes of a painting by the English artist John Martin, we can come up with some interesting reflections.

The huge set, which would have remained at the filming location until 1919 and was later the victim of a fire, was rebuilt some time later, nowadays part of the Hollywood and Highland Center. This information would be enough to prove the importance of this film and the Babylonian image that it created in the Hollywood imagination. If we add that the set was elaborated according to John Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821), it is clear that behind a mere scenario, an important conception is revealed. First, it should be noted that the Babylon created by the painter on canvas was, according to him, «the united talents of the Indian, the Egyptian and Babylonian architects» who had employed efforts «to produce those buildings» (McCall, 1998: 191). In fact, although Martin is familiar with the accounts of travelers like Benjamim de Tudela or Pietro Della Valle¹⁷, his portrait of Babylon appears to be quite distorted and romanticized. Monumental buildings with wide staircases, punctuated by several colonnades, using stone as material, are enclosed in an apocalyptic mist, which denounces the imminent end. Martin certainly intended to compose an analogy between the fall of the empires of Antiquity and English society¹⁸, warning to the dangers of self-destruction. Like the Roman

¹⁷ The reports of European travellers, the first of the 12th century, the second of the 17th century, were important to understand some aspects of the Mesopotamian landscape (McCall, 1998: 189).

¹⁸ As regards Babylon, and the East more generally, the glory and splendour of the past, the opulence of the court, which Martin expressed so well on the screen, contrasted

Church at the time of the Reformation, London was seen in Victorian times as modern Babylon.



Figure 10: Set from the great court of Babylon of *Intolerance* (1916) from David W. Griffith.

When choosing the scenario of his Babylon, David W. Griffith would have been inspired by this work, maintaining the proportions that the painter so thoroughly portrayed (Seymour, 2008: 176) and granting it an identical form (Fig. 10). In the movie we can see the arcades, the columns, and the monumental staircase just like in the painting. Martin's work would, in short, result in the great Babylonian court of King Balthasar of *Intolerance* (1916), migrating the metaphor previously applied to London to the United States and its society. At the request of the director, his assistant Joseph

grotesquely with the decadence of that time, which was but the natural consequence of the first. Martin asserted himself as an interlocutor between the Victorian audience and the ancient land of the Euphrates and the Tiger (Ziter, 2003: 137-138, 143).

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Henabery would also have added to the scene some elements extracted from the cinematic universe of *Cabiria* (1914)¹⁹, which were in stark contrast to what was the ancient Mesopotamia - the giant elephants (!) that topped the columns and that we also see adorning the exotic bed of Sardanapalo in the famous painting by Eugène Delacroix *La Mort de Sardanapale* (1827)²⁰. The huge palatial courtyard of the capital of the Euphrates, therefore, resulted in *Intolerance* (1916), a true fusion of influences. It should be added that Griffith, unlike Martin, was able to profit from the excavations that, meanwhile, brought Assyrian antiquities to light, introducing on the *Martinian* stage some characteristic elements of Mesopotamian imagery: the rosettes, the low reliefs and the neo-Assyrian statues. We must highlight this last aspect: Assyrian, not Babylonian.



Figures 11 and 12: Scenes from the movies *Martyrs Chrétiens* (1905) and *Le festin de Balthazar* (1910).

The court of Balthasar in *Intolerance* (1916) is the scenario of a festive banquet offered by the king to an immense palatial population, a feast that is reported in Dn. 5. Interestingly, although *Intolerance* was produced at the dawn of cinema, this colossal celebration had already been represented on cinema screens in two previous productions. We speak of *Martyrs Chrétiens* (1905), a French production by Lucien Nonguet, and *Le festin de Balthazar* (1910), also a French movie, launched by the famous director Louis Feuillade (Figs. 11 and 12). Both make a faithful portrait of Daniel's account, mixing it with the Jewish-Christian notion of a decadent Babylon,

¹⁹ *Cabiria* (1914) itself is, in reality, a mixture of Egyptian, classical, Indian and Assyrian cultural aspects (Michelakis and Wyke, 2013: 21). The various antiques are merged into a single ancient identity.

²⁰ The exuberance and exoticism of elephants were traits associated with the East.

exposed to the vices of sensuality, excess eroticism and bacchanals (Fig. 11). This is, in addition, a view in accordance with the Orientalist ideological current, a word that Said considered “the generic term that I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically” (Orientalism: 73). In fact, Balthazar, the lustful king who is surrounded by courtesans, is reminiscent of an oriental *Nawab*, a despot devoid of the values associated with bravery and masculinity that were perpetuated by the West. In the *other* were mirrored the dangers in which the French society of that time could incur, a society in profound social transformation and class tension, at the time when the greatest political force were the Radicals, deeply nationalist (Hayward, 1993: 82).

Although the past projected on the screen does not necessarily reflect the values of the nation (French, American, Italian), given the fact that it is a mirror of pre-classical or classical antiquity and a time confined *back there*, there is a moralizing background which aims to reinforce determinant social and cultural values. Films like *Le Festin de Balthazar* (1910) are an example of this (Brotons Capó, 2014: 81). There are aesthetic and moral concepts that aim to contribute to a national cultural memory, bridging the themes of classical and oriental antiquity with contemporary political causes, and adapting their language to cinema viewers.

Finally, from the Book of Daniel, we can mention the episode in which the Prophet was thrown into the lions' den and which served for so many cinematographic scenes, creating analogies between the Old Testament and many other social contexts, as is the case of *Martyrs Chrétiens* (1905). Cinema often presents Christianity and Christians as martyrs persecuted or submissive to an ancient pagan and idolatrous world (Lapeña Marchena, 2011: 8). Like Babylon, Rome is often presented as the villain, antithesis of a society loyal to the European / Western values. Not only are Christians the target of a massacre in *Martyrs Chrétiens* (1905), but the heroin in *Male and Female* (1919) is expressly identified as a Christian in a Babylonian world (!). Spatial and temporal transpositions that only cinema could offer. The last film, which featured one of the biggest stars of silent cinema, Gloria Swanson, as the protagonist, is a social comedy by Cecil B. DeMille who calls on Antiquity, in this case the Babylonian one, as a way of establishing an analogous parallel with the present, having a moral implicit. Antiquity appears at the service of modernity, bringing to light problems such as the differences and / or similarities between different sexes and the struggles that then arose regarding gender roles and which would become more acute in the next era (the age of jazz and the famous

flappers). On the screen, the young Christian tries to impose herself in a masculinized society.

As we said, cinema would make use of the lion attack / taming theme, building its own fables and fantasies and introducing the theme in different environments, distancing itself from the Semitic mental substratum. In the fiction presented in *Male and Female* (1919)²¹, real time suddenly gives way to a dreamlike time, which pushes the protagonists of the plot into a past world. And that past takes place in a fictional Babylon, governed in a tyrannical manner by the main character, the king starred by William Crichton. When an unsubmissive Christian girl descends into the lions' pit after the *ultimatum* launched by the sovereign in the sense that she submits herself to him, it is not so much survival through the call of God that is at stake, but the revolt against the authoritarian power of the monarch and the inglorious attempt by the young woman to fight injustice. The punishment applied to the Christian servant starts, however, as in the Old Testament narrative, from the insurrection against the sovereign. The entire episode should therefore have been inspired in the account presented in Daniel.

In short, the ancient word of the Old Testament survived and prevailed, even after the first excavations in Babylon²² at the beginning of the 20th century, and the architectural and documentary discoveries that made it possible to reach its history.

The time when the Assyrians were the dominant force²³

In addition to the Old Testament, the Greek-Roman authors also managed to impose their legends and myths about characters from ancient Mesopotamia. Perhaps one of the most interesting and ancient accounts of the country between the river's monarchs is the one we find in Diodorus Siculus. The historian traces in *Bibliotheca Historica*, in the 1st century BC, supported by the lost writings of Ctesias of Cnidus, who have lived in the

²¹ A similar episode takes place in *La vergine di Babilonia* (1910), where curiously the woman placed in the den is the Jewish Ester (a character certainly inspired by the homonymous biblical book).

²² The first excavation campaigns in Babylon, led by the German archaeologist Robert Koldewey, took place from 1899 to 1917. Koldewey's first work on the excavations, *Das Wiederstehen Babylon*, was published in 1913 and translated into English the following year.

²³ Diod. Sic., 2.1.

time of Artaxerxes II, a detailed narrative about those who would become, at the time of cinema, some of the main protagonists of Italian films about pre-classical culture.

Semiramis

Diodorus Siculus talks at length about Semiramis, the legendary Assyrian queen, exploring her exploits and showing her governmental and warlike abilities. Semiramis had been the first great queen in the whole East, a builder and beautician of Babylon, a winner of foreign armies and associated with the famous hanging gardens²⁴. As with many legendary figures, it is impossible to see a single historical character in Semiramis. Instead, it is likely that it results from a composite of several female historical figures who have somehow achieved prominence in Mesopotamian society. In the same way, it is possible that several historical episodes, dispersed in space and time and associated with different actors, converged and resulted in the crystallization of her persona. If previously believed to be Sammu-ramat, the wife of Šamši-Adad V who is forced to take over the kingdom during his son's minority, Semiramis' true origin, nowadays it is more and more consensual that she should be sought among Naqia, Esarhaddon's mother and wife of Sennacherib, and Atalya, wife of Sargon II (Dalley, 2005 and Asher-Greve, 2007: 360-361). All of them performed an action that went beyond the extensions that were normally associated with the role reserved for women, namely: the assumption of the power, the arbitration of diplomatic conflicts; recognition of governance by peers; the honor of being the recipient of offerings and dedications in public monuments.

The character of Diodorus Siculus is the protagonist of the French short film *Sémiramis* (1910), directed by Camille de Morlhon. The film follows in his footsteps, one of the most interesting scenarios being the one that is described as follows by the director: «Les jardins suspendus²⁵ (...) Des femmes jambés nues vêtues de gaze légère vont et viennent les unes sortent du bassin. D'autres y rentrent. Elles ont de l'eau jusqu'aux hanches et jouent avec des fleus. D'autres enfin sont couchées sur le gazon du bord du bassin» (Brotons Capó, 2014: 156). Where can we find a similar environment? Does *Intolerance* (1916) not offer its own bacchanal, Ištar's temple of love (Fig. 19), where half-naked women with transparencies and

²⁴ On these, see the hypothesis raised by Dalley, 2013.

²⁵ The hanging gardens are also a hallmark in Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004).

sparkles spread out? And what about the feast by *Martyrs Chrétiens* (1905) (Fig. 11)? The body of the oriental woman appears on the screen, as it appeared in the paintings and was portrayed in the literature, exposed to the gaze of the western man, raising his sensual and erotic dreams, claiming his dominance. Semiramis is, perhaps, along with Cleopatra and other figures of the Eastern world, the feminine sensuality elevated to its maximum exponent.

However, along with Semiramis' good fortune, her extreme ambition, shrewdness and villainy, very symptomatic values of the Greek ethnocentric vision of the ancient Middle East and Mesopotamia, go hand in hand. In fact, even Diodorus Siculus himself, despite extolling the queen's qualities, mentions her character defects, complaining that "choosing out the most handsome of the soldiers she consorted with them and then made away with all who had lain with her" (Diod. Sic., 2.13). Semiramis' sexuality is one of the traits explored by authors such as Justin or Giovanni Boccaccio. At the same time, a whole set of attitudes misrepresents its character. *Semiramis* (1910) also highlights these less ethical traits, for example in the scene where the queen kills her husband Ninus (Fig. 13) in order to usurp his throne. Ninus' death would have been widely used centuries ago by dramaturgy. The persona of Semiramis has been shaped over time, from the classical period, through the medieval, the Renaissance and the Baroque periods.



Figures 13 e 14: Ninus, king of Babylon, is poisoned in *Sémiramis* (1910); Semiramis, the counsellor Ghelas and the little Adath in *Io Semiramide* (1963).

In the middle of the 18th century, Voltaire launched his *Sémiramis*, more precisely in the year 1748, centring its plot on the murder of the queen's husband carried out by her and by Assur, her lover, a character he

introduced. Plus, he makes the queen cherish with an incestuous love for her own son, Arsace. The Enlightenment philosopher creates a strong, ambitious and seductive woman; however, at the end of the narrative he concedes her a final redemption when she is accidentally killed by her own son²⁶. The Italian film *La regina di Ninive* (1911) would follow this narrative closely, almost a century later, collecting the same ingredients as the murder of the husband, the secret identity of the son and the death of the mother, the *regina*, by his hands. Although with different nomenclatures, the story remains, focusing on the vile character of the queen, who ends her husband, just as it happened in *Sémiramis* (1910).

Just before Voltaire's tragedy, the work of the Italian Pietro Metastasio *Semiconide riconosciuta* was released and first staged in Rome in 1729. Metastasio only uses the background context presented by Diodorus Siculus. The whole plot is pure invention, and the author does not attribute a violent character to Semiramis, as it happened in Voltaire. Plus, he introduces several new characters, such as Scitalce, Idreno, Mirteo, Tamiri or Sibari. These last two names will be mentioned in detail below. It was precisely from the works of Metastasio and Voltaire that more traces were collected for the arguments of *pepla*²⁷ films such as *La Cortigiana di Babilonia* (1954) and *Io Semiramide* (1963), two films around the character Semiramis, or even *La regina di Ninive* (1911). The dissemination of Metastasio's²⁸ work confirms, moreover, its importance as a striking work from the 17th and 18th centuries in Italy, country of production of those films.

Themes such as betrayal and the fight between forces within the court, mirrored in the excessive ambition of a high official or a competitor to power, are transversal to both Metastasio and Voltaire. If, in the first case, it is Sibari, confidant and hidden lover of Semiramis, who conspires against the queen, trying to make her fall from grace, in Voltaire, it is the queen herself who, together with Assur, also her secret lover, plots against the ruler of the Assyrians, King Ninus. Sibari's greed is transposed to the figures of Assur and Semiramis with the French enlightenment writer clearly showing the petulance of the famous queen. There is a moral aspect

²⁶ In addition to resorting to classical texts, the French author would also have based himself on the Armenian tradition about the queen based on the 8th century account of Moses Khorenati (Seymour, 2014: 109 and 166).

²⁷ *peplum* (plural: *pepla*) is the name usually attributed to films set in the classical or pre-classical era, characterized by the existence of a muscular hero. The term was adopted by the French using a Greek word (Di Chiara, 2016: 5). In English, these films are usually called *sword and sandal*.

²⁸ The work came to have about forty adaptations.

that is accentuated in 1749, certainly owing to the time when the narrative was written.

Sibari seems to be transported from Metastasio's²⁹ work to the film *La Cortigiana di Babilonia* (1954) as a high official who weaves a plan against the life of the king, just as he wove against the life of the young sovereign in the 18th century *opus*. Both in the tragedy and in the argument, he is the one who prepares the poison and devises the whole murder plan, although the future queen is to blame (Fig. 15). Collusion within the court is a theme present in both *La Cortigiana di Babilonia* (1954) and *Io Semiramide* (1963). However, the characterizations of the young woman in the two productions are very dissimilar. In fact, while in the first film she corresponds to a docile and innocent woman, a harmless shepherdess, in the second she is the seductive and tempting sovereign, capable of everything to achieve power. Semiramis, much like Cleopatra, is able to bring together both positive and negative aspects in her *persona*, leaving her character at the mercy of the filmmakers' choices. Thus, although in the two films the antics to gain hegemony favour the imposition of new powers, in *Io Semiramide* (1963), contrary to what happens in *La Cortigiana di Babilonia* (1954) where the queen is humble, it is the sovereign herself who delivers the poisoned cup to the throne suitor³⁰. This prevented him from sharing the kingdom with her, which would make her a mere consort and not a queen *de facto*. Doesn't this act remind us of Voltaire?

²⁹ The beautiful Tamiri also seems to move from Metastasio's work to the film by Luigi Maggi *La regina di Ninive* (1911) or even to *L'eroe di Babilonia* (1963) by Siro Marcellini.

³⁰ In the film, the role is up to her lover Kir.



Figure 15: Semiramis collects the cup that poisons King Assur in *La Cortigiana di Babilonia* (1954).

Nevertheless, the introduction in the French writer's work of Arsace (the son of Semiramis whom she thought was dead) attenuates the queen's most damning attitudes. At the end of the narrative she regrets her actions: "*J'ai reçu de tes mains la mort qui m'étoit due. (...) Je te pardonne tout*" (Voltaire, 1749: 73-74). The mother's recognition of the child is a crucial point in the plot, which, in a way, alters the queen's most negative impressions. The film *Io Semiramide* (1963) does not forget the importance of the son and, although in the film he is still a minor, he is the one who makes possible the rise of the queen, as his guardian, and it is in him that lies the function of granting Assyria a new destiny and new glory after her death (Fig. 14). The hope of a new dawn is concentrated in Semiramis' son. In this sense, Ghelas, the faithful confidant of the monarch in the film, exhorts him to "*ricorda Adath, cerca di essere degno di lei*", maintaining the course that the great ruler, according to his opinion, had initiated. In *La regina di Ninive* (1911), the son of the ruler of the Assyrian city of Nineveh, resembles, in

everything, the hero Arsace of Voltaire and Rossini³¹, falling on him, after the discovery of his true identity, the government of the city. The mother's accidental murder is the climax of the film, representing both the end of one cycle and the beginning of another.

Anyway, Semiramis hit theatres in the 10s and 50s / 60s of the 20th century as an amalgamation of different traditions. However, and not forgetting that the films we are talking about are Italian productions, we must take into account two different aspects: on the one hand, the Greco-Roman legacy at a time when Italy was recovering from the Great War, thus appealing to its deepest roots; on the other hand, the importance of opera in previous centuries and its introduction in the cinematographic medium. Semiramis appears as a versatile character, who could summon very different values and morals.

Sardanapalus

Like Semiramis, Diodorus Siculus dwells on the reign of the legendary Sardanapalus, especially on his last days on the throne. Also like Semiramis, it is possible that Sardanapalus is a composite figure, derived from the historical monarchs Ashurbanipal (king who brought ancient Assyria to its highest exponent), Šamaš-šumu-ukin (his brother, who would have perished in a fire in the palace of Babylon) and Sîn-šar-iškun (last monarch of Nineveh)³². Contrary to what happens with Semiramis, however, there is no literary and / or musical narrative in which Sardanapalus is presented in a positive way³³, although Byron adorns him with a mixture of affability and affection.

Although operas and tragedies based on Sardanapalus and composed in the 17th century are known, it is in the first quarter of the 19th century that the most well-known composition about the king of Assyria appears, written by Lord Byron and made known to the public in 1821. The English author collects much of the narrative of the *Bibliotheca Historica* by Diodorus Siculus, but summarizes the action of his play in just one day. It is in this space of time that the fate of Assyria is played. Byron's

³¹ The most famous opera on Semiramis is precisely Rossini's *Semiramide*, based on the work of Voltaire.

³² About this, see Schmiesing, 2015: 1.

³³ Sardanapalien, Sardanapaliste (and other derived words) become adjectives for "depravity" or "transgression of gender boundaries" (*Dictionnaire de la langue française du dix-seizième siècle* apud. Fraser, 2003: 315 and 329).

Sardanapalus, which would also influence cinema, namely Italian with the films *Sardanapalo Re dell'Assiria* (1910) and *Le sette folgori di Assur* (1962), develops around the character that gives the name to the play and around his passions. This character would have been thought of as “brave (though voluptuous as history represents him) - and also as amicable”³⁴, simultaneously distancing and approaching himself of the archetypes of monarch to the Victorian society. The entire discourse of *Sardanapalus* evokes a philosophy of life that, instead of being based on bravery and warrior strength, is based on the pleasures of the body. He is the monarch who cherishes “lascivious tinklings” (Byron, 1823: 6), who speaks in “softening voices” (*idem*). This is also the image that permeates the story of the Greek historian.



Figures 16 and 17: The banquet of *Le sette folgori di Assur* (1962); Jocelyn Lane playing Mirra in the same film.



³⁴ Letter from Byron to his editor John Murray with comments on the character (LJ VIII, 126-27 apud Pomarè, 2014: 264-265).

Figure 18: Esperia and Taneal in the movie *Ercole contro i tiranni di Babilonia* (1964).

Sardanapalus is a king who likes to feast, together with his concubines, and the banquet held by the king, in the final moments of Nineveh, when the city was surrounded by enemy troops, is an unavoidable theme in cinema (Figs. 16). Faust and intemperance are undoubtedly connected with the story of the heyday and destruction of the great Mesopotamian capitals. We saw it before with Babylon, and now we see it with Nineveh. It is curious that the fate of Babylon is also played out following a great banquet carried out by Balthasar. There is a symmetry between the capitals of Babylon and Assyria that have as a key point the defiant and depraved attitude of their sovereigns.



Fig 19. Still from the movie *Intolerance* (1916) with a scene from the Temple of Love.

However, Byron's great introduction is not this banquet, but the character Myrrah (Fig. 17), Sardanapalus' favourite, who would suffer with him the same untoward fate. The love expressed on both sides and the complicity they share in the play, sometimes overlap with the bitterness of the fate for which they are precipitated. This slave and the loves she arouses is a

central theme both in *Sardanapalo Re dell'Assiria* (1910) and in *Le sette folgori di Assur* (1962). Plus, it is possible to outline an interesting parallel between the Myrrah of this last film and the Esperia from *Ercole contro i tiranni di Babilonia* (1964). Both represent heroines of the plots, and their presence in history aims to emphasize the hero's dispute for love and good. Furthermore, in *Ercole contro i tiranni di Babilonia* (1964), the clash between West and East is visible. In this film, the hero and heroine who make up the romantic couple come from a Greco-Roman cultural universe. These are Hercules, the mythical hero of Greek mythology, and Esperia, a fictional character, corresponding to the queen of the Hellenes and holding a power that extended over a territory that would become, in a time after the plot, part of Europe. Both are faced with the powers in force on the eastern side of the Mediterranean, which are ruled by cruelty and tyranny, as well as by a blind ambition for power. The emphasis is placed on the population of the neighbouring kingdoms of Babylon who, by their sovereigns (the trio of brothers Taneal, Assur and Salmanassar) are enslaved and forced to work.



Figure 20: Final fire and storm that falls on Nineveh in *Le sette folgori di Assur* (1962).

In the confrontation between the Fertile Crescent and Hellas, the latter would be victorious. Nevertheless, the duel only ends with the destruction and total annulment of the city of Babylon, which is overthrown and set on fire, leaving no possibility for it to rise again. The glory of the West and the return of the heroes “to their land” is accomplished through the

invalidation of the East and the annulment of the *other*. The contrast stands out again in the characters and in their characterization: Taneal representing the seductive and cruel version of the Oriental woman and Esperia (Fig. 18) the virtuous and humiliating version of the Western woman (such as Myrrah)³⁵. Again, we emphasize that the representation of women on the screen was dependent on what we can consider as the view that Western societies made of the East as a space of sexual promise (Kennedy, 2007: 3). The voluptuous idea of carnal pleasures³⁶ offered by women in the temple, as in *Intolerance* (1916) (Fig. 19), is an example of this.

This look over the *other* who lived at their doorstep, but who was distant enough not to share the same political and cultural ideals, demonstrates, in short, a first example of Orientalism, experienced in the transition between the decline of the ancient civilizations of the Middle Orient and the affirmation of the societies of the so-called classical period. Jumping to the 1960s of the 20th century, the same vision is evident in the Eurocentric values, of a Europe and Italy that are heirs of the Greco-Roman legacy and of an East with which it had recently struggled and among which there was still a big “gap”.

Returning to the narrative about Sardanapalus, an oriental king incapable of governing his throne, besides the fire, already present in Diodorus, Byron also adds, to the final destruction of Nineveh, a storm and the sudden rise of the river waters, gathering all the fury overwhelming in the destruction of the city (Fig. 20). This image is mirrored in *Le sette folgori di Assur* (1962), a film that places the emphasis of the city's fall on an unthinkable act of Sardanapalus, which leads him to destroy the statue of his main god - hence the title of the film. Despite being very different from the typical Greek Sardanapalus³⁷, the character in the film also capitulates his city before the battle and the unrestrained anger of the waters, leaving the city at the mercy of her misfortune. The slave Mirra of the film, on the other hand, composes the dramatic and familiar history of the Assyrian court, creating a love triangle between the two brothers (Sardanapalus and

³⁵ We should mention the use by Esperia, Mirra, or even the Semiramis of *La Cortigiana di Babilonia* (1954) of white robes, a colour associated with the docility and purity expected from Western women.

³⁶ The very idea of the eastern harem hovered in the western man's mentality as a symbol of male superiority, concretizing the notion of a voluptuous orient (Kabbani, 2008: 39 and 118).

³⁷ The Sardanapalo of *Le sette folgori di Assur* (1962) is not the effeminate king that we see in Byron. Instead, he presents himself as one would believe to be an ancient Mesopotamian king, fighting for power, even with his brother.

Shamash)³⁸ that is, in a way, also associated with the events that precipitate the ruin of Assyria. The characters differ slightly from Diodorus, although the background of the film plot remains.

Brief Conclusions

The film, the object of analysis in this brief study, cannot and must not forget: 1) the artistic (painting, sculpture, theatre) or literary (dramatic plays, librettos, poetry) productions that precede it and on which it is based; 2) the social context in which it is produced, in which it is premiered and in which it is received. Thus, it will not be by chance that, in relation to parts 2.1 and 2.2., analysed above, all the productions we refer to are European, French and essentially Italian works. Who else but Europe used its classic roots, its Greek and Roman legacy? The legendary characters created by the Greeks and emphasized by the Romans would serve as an argument for many films, extolling the authority, the bravery and the values of the days of old and simultaneously calling for a nationalist feeling then in vogue. Who but the French, Voltaire's nation, to launch, in the early days of silent cinema, *Sémiramis* (1910)?

On the other hand, if we look at the cinematographic productions referred to in parts 1.1. and 1.2., we can see that the majority of North-American works on ancient Mesopotamia are based precisely on the Old Testament account. But did the United States not claim with great impetus its association with the Judeo-Christian matrix? And are not the patriotic, social and political values defended by them outlined in these?

It remains to be noted that the long journey that each of these episodes or characters took, from ancient Mesopotamia to the twentieth century, passing through the "sieve" of biblical writers and Greek-Roman authors, provided the meeting of multiple traditions and identities. After all, "a tale never loses in the telling". Thus, the Mesopotamia that we see featured on cinema screens is composed of an amalgamation of different cultural backgrounds that have been syncretized in the same universe. The Babylon of *Intolerance* (1916), in its sets and its characterization, is more Assyrian, it is more a classic world, than Babylon itself. But what did this detail interest the 20th century cinema viewer?

The Mesopotamia of cinema, like that of other visual media, has not managed to get rid of centuries of overlapping and crossed receptions. The

³⁸ Recalling the disputes that cuneiform sources mention between Ashurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin.

Mesopotamia of cinema is, in essence, only its idea, reconstructed according to our sensibilities through a writing in movement.

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