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The Ben-Hur Franchise and the Rise of Blockbuster Hollywood

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Film Studies

May, 2021

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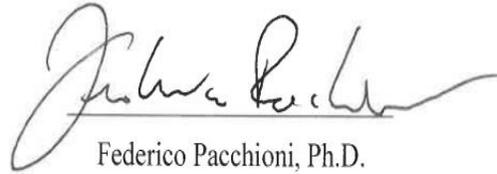
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April 2021

The Ben-Hur Franchise and the Rise of Blockbuster Hollywood

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ABSTRACT

The Ben-Hur Franchise and the Rise of Blockbuster Hollywood

by Michael Chian

The *Ben-Hur* films were some of the most popular, controversial, and financially successful films of the 20th century. As a result, Hollywood mindset and practices were heavily influenced by the marketing strategies and discourse surrounding these films, as many studios and filmmakers wanted to achieve the same, if not a higher, level of success. Thus, the current state of the blockbuster oriented American film industry owes a great debt to the *Ben-Hur* films for helping to popularize blockbuster filmmaking. While the blockbuster marketing, fandom, and discussions of today are more profuse and sophisticated than that of the past, the *Ben-Hur* films demonstrate that the basis of these dimensions have not changed, but simply evolved over time.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
ABSTRACT.....	V
INTRODUCTION.....	1
ADAPTING THE NOVEL FOR THE SCREEN	3
THE CREATION OF THE FILMS.....	4
THE MARKETING OF THE FILMS.....	9
THE FANDOM AND INDUSTRY DISCOURSE	22
RECEPTION OF THE FILMS	27
CONCLUSION	31
FILMOGRAPHY	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY	35

Introduction

In 2016, a plethora of blockbuster features was released, including *Captain America: Civil War* (directed by Anthony and Joe Russo), *Deadpool* (directed by Tim Miller), *Doctor Strange* (directed by Scott Derrickson), *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (directed by Gareth Edwards), and *Zootopia* (directed by Byron Howard, Richard Moore, and Jared Bush). Many of these films would achieve incredible success with *Captain America*, *Rogue One*, and *Zootopia* making over a billion dollars at the box office. Yet among the long line of releases and box office champions was a lesser-known and talked about feature that would prove to be one of the biggest flops of that year. That film's name was *Ben-Hur* (directed by Timur Bekmambetov). In the overall scope of the film industry, *Ben-Hur* is of one of the most successful blockbusters of all time that inspired numerous filmmakers, including George Lucas and Ridley Scott. To film scholars, *Ben-Hur* is the name of a century-and-a-half-long franchise comprised of a successful novel, play, silent film, and the 1959 epic. Knowing this, how could a franchise that had achieved so much success for such a long period have come to a disappointing and silent end? The history of the Hollywood industry is grounded in the promotion and gossip surrounding spectacles. From the films on the peepshow machines of the 1890s to the IMAX and 3D blockbusters of the 21st century, the latest and greatest films have sparked discussions, reverence, and controversies throughout the ages. Among the long line of spectacles are the epics and blockbusters, pictures that showcase new and advanced technology, sophisticated sets, all-star casts, incredible visuals, and dynamic editing.

Though blockbusters tend to have these factors, this thesis considers a feature to be a part of this film category depending on their ability to achieve extreme financial success (making far more than the production cost) and become well-recognized in the country they were made

and/or globally. Because of this, it is important to note that the first two *Ben-Hur* films are not blockbusters due to either a failed release or a massive production cost that ate up its earnings. Nevertheless, they still helped establish the usual practices of making and selling blockbuster films through massive advertising and merchandising, celebrity casts, appealing to fandoms, and industry discourse. Thus, while not all the films were blockbusters, they are all part of the *Ben-Hur* franchise due to them marketing the same story with new and additional changes such as all-star casts or innovative film equipment.

Prompted by the popularity and financial success of the *Ben-Hur* franchise, key scholars, including Jon Solomon, Barbara Ryan, Shamir Milette, Lord Emily Chow-Kambitsch, and Mark Storey, have examined the marketing, public discourse, fandom, and success that have accompanied these spectacular epics in the eras they were made. By looking at these scholars' materials, along with industry trade and guild film journals from the Media Digital History Library surrounding the marketing, public discourse, fandom, and reception of the three *Ben-Hur* versions released in the 20th century, *Ben-Hur* (Sidney Olcott and Frank Rose, 1907), *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Fred Niblo, 1925), and *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), I reveal how these films represent the American film industry during the periods they were made and how they relate to 21st century Hollywood. While there is a plethora of scholarship discussing the changes in Hollywood and the rise of blockbusters, there is less information on how the marketing and dialogue surrounding the *Ben-Hur* series captures the development of certain blockbuster practices and mindsets, and how these factors would continue into the current era.¹ Though many

1. Charles R. Acland, *American Blockbuster: Movies, Technology, and Wonder* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Sheldon Hall and Stephen Neale, *Epics, Spectacles and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010); Jessica Johnson, "Stardom, Spectacle, Show, and Salability: United Artists and the Founding of the Hollywood Blockbuster Model" (master's thesis, Chapman University, 2019); Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin, *Looking*

of the scholars who wrote on *Ben-Hur* previously discussed the popularity, drama, and success surrounding the *Ben-Hur* films, they are less focused on how these criteria embody Hollywood's gradual transformation into a blockbuster industry. The *Ben-Hur* series is an excellent case study for understanding how the industry came to be blockbuster oriented, as the franchise itself had been one of the very first multi-media blockbuster franchises. Because of this, *Ben-Hur* is one of the few early fictional works that helped prime the American film industry for future blockbuster culture.

The paper will first explore how the *Ben-Hur* book was prime material for film adaptations due to its popularity. After this, I will discuss the creation of the films, followed by the marketing section. Here I will detail how the advertising for the play influenced that of the 1907 picture, along with how the marketing of all the films shares similarities with that of today. Following the marketing, I will then discuss the industry discourse, fandom, and reception that surrounded these films and how these factors also relate to those of blockbuster films today. Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate how the *Ben-Hur* films acted as a catalyst in instigating a Hollywood blockbuster-focused industry. Through this knowledge, it can be understood how the current development, distribution, and discourse surrounding Hollywood blockbusters came to be, along with why the 2016 *Ben-Hur* failed at the box office.

Adapting the Novel for the Screen

Before analyzing the primary research, I will first briefly discuss the popularity of the novel and how it proved to be blockbuster material for future films. *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* achieved success by appealing to the interests of the American public during the late 19th

Past the Screen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Richard A. Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from the Silent Era to the Modern Day* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishing, 2015); Julia Stringer, *Movie Blockbusters* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

century. In the late 19th to early 20th century, the imperial ideology known as manifest destiny dominated U.S. national thought.² This Western worldview was reflected by several philosophies and literary works of the time, such as tales about Americans conquering the un-tame wilderness through the blessings of God.³ Wallace's novel embodies the ideas and doctrines of this ideology through its presentation of the birth of Christianity as the rise of a new empire that will conquer a barbaric world.⁴ The novel's design helped readers draw comparisons and emphasize with the story of *Ben-Hur* and their Christian practicing lives, such as Ben Hur helping to bring salvation to the Middle East vs Americans conquering the Wild West through Christianity.⁵ Overall, this version of the tale of Christ in the 19th century would lead to a massive following of the story, one that would continue into the 20th century. As a result, the American film industry in its infant stages would take an interest in adapting the book to attract its following.

The Creation of the Films

In the early 20th century, moving pictures were beginning to gain popularity amongst Americans.⁶ In 1907 the Nickelodeons, the first form of indoor film exhibition, were experiencing a wealth of business amidst the economic recession.⁷ By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, there was an increased demand for more "respectable" films due to the preponderance of Christianity in the U.S.⁸ While it would not be until the end of the first decade and beginning of the second that the industry would start to produce film versions of the classics

2. Mark Storey, "Ben-Hur and the Spectacle of Empire," *John Hopkins University Press* 42, no. 1 (2015) 85, 93, <https://doi.org/10.1353/saf.2015.0004>.

3. Storey, "Ben Hur and the Spectacle," 88-92.

4. Storey, 86.

5. Jon Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 200-201.

6. Eileen Bowser, *History of the American Cinema: The Transformation of Cinema* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 1.

7. Bowser, *History of American Cinema*, 1, 4.

8. Bowser, 225.

that were feature-length, such as *Life of Moses* (1909), *From the Manger to the Cross/Jesus of Nazareth* (1912) and *Quo Vadis?* (1913), the industry did try to take advantage of this demand beforehand.⁹ Because of this desire for classical epics along with the public still maintaining their religious zeal from the 19th century, the American film studio Kalem sought to capitalize.

Wanting to play a part in the demand for more sophisticated pictures along with the current interest in seeing popular Christian works adapted into passion plays, Kalem films, who were not even a year old at the time, decided to make their own biblical picture, and *Ben-Hur* seemed like an obvious choice.¹⁰ Taking inspiration from the play, Kalem borrowed several aspects from Klaw and Erlanger's successful adaptation, including elaborate painted backdrops and sets, numerous extras, and expressive actors and actresses.¹¹ However, what is significant about this film is the differences between it and the novel and play. Because of the previous film constraints that only allowed for a short amount of film to be made, the *Ben-Hur* story was fragmented, the process of stitching together the peak moments of a narrative to create a shorter and more exciting version.¹² As a result, many of the calmer and more intimate scenes from the original were left out.¹³ Additionally, the film was shot using a stationary camera, thus only capturing the quadrigas passing by in the race scene.¹⁴ However, a more important distinction is the fact that the film avoids the Christian aspects of the original text, such as Ben Hur meeting with Christ and converting to Christianity.¹⁵ This was done to market a well-known name while

9. Bowser, 256.

10. Emily Chow-Kambitsch, "An Alternative 'Roman Spectacle': Fragmentation, Invocations of Theatre, and Audience Engagement Strategy in Kalem's 1907 *Ben-Hur*," *Manchester University Press* 43, no. 2 (2016): 206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748372717707715>.

11. Chow-Kambitsch, "An Alternative 'Roman Spectacle,'" 210.

12. Chow-Kambitsch, 203.

13. Chow-Kambitsch, 204.

14. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 74.

15. Chow-Kambitsch, "An Alternative 'Roman Spectacle,'" 202-4.

distancing themselves from the play or having to pay and give credit to Wallace.¹⁶ Nevertheless many still went to see the film due to the religious nature of the story and were impressed by its spectacular features. Unfortunately for Kalem, they were hit with a massive copyright infringement lawsuit by Henry Wallace (Lew Wallace's son and owner of his rights and property), Harper & Brothers, and Klaw and Erlanger.¹⁷ Thus the film was pulled from theatres and Kalem was forced to reimburse the three parties. While Kalem's struggles arose around the release of *Ben-Hur*, MGM's difficulties would come about during the production.

During the 1920s, Goldwyn Pictures was negatively impacted by the economic climate of the time.¹⁸ As a result, the company needed a hit picture to save them from this dire state. After witnessing the success of Italian epic features like *Julius Caesar* (1909), *Dante's Inferno* (1911), and *Quo Vadis?* (1912), along with the success of the American-inspired epics, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Goldwyn realized that the only thing that could save them was an epic. Because of this, Goldwyn would make a deal with Erlanger, to produce a *Ben-Hur* film, with Erlanger maintaining control in its sale of the film.¹⁹ The 1925 *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* film, now being produced by MGM, was shot on 35s Technicolor.²⁰ Much like the Klaw and Erlanger production, Jesus Christ was also never portrayed on the screen, with only his hands and feet seen.²¹ The production of the 1925 film was fraught with issues and almost bankrupted the company. This can be best understood through the notorious filming of the naval battle that led to the possible deaths of several Italian extras after drowning in the water.²² The over-desire of

16. Chow-Kambitsch, 204-6.

17. Chow-Kambitsch, 202.

18. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 569.

19. Solomon, 70.

20. Solomon, 75.

21. Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics*, 68.

22. Lindsay, 68.

MGM to create the biggest picture in the world, due mostly to their desperation after experiencing financial woes, caused such a production debacle that the controversy surrounding it became a spectacle. Fortunately, the film completed production and was one of the grandest features of the time. The reviews for this film demonstrate that, like the previous picture, audiences were drawn to the spectacle aspect, such as the large casts and sets or the thrilling and costly action scenes. While the next iteration would also have a complex production, the film did not suffer from any issues or disasters during its making.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the film industry was threatened by the growing popularity of broadcast television.²³ To many, the television was a more convenient and affordable means of film entertainment, and thus there was little desire to go out and see pictures.²⁴ By 1959, MGM had experienced several difficult years due to this dilemma as well as management turmoil and lackluster releases.²⁵ Because of this, MGM was desperate for a box office hit to save them from an imminent demise.²⁶ Seeing how the biblical epics were once again a popular phenomenon in the industry, due to the public's devotion to religion to combat "atheist Communism" as well as the renaissance in film technology, MGM decided to resurrect *Ben-Hur*, a franchise that had previously saved them in the 20s.²⁷ For this film equivalent of the second coming, the company would implement the most sophisticated technology available along with recruiting the most accomplished and well-known artists in the industry. MGM partnered with Panavision for the filming, using the Camera 65 widescreen format, which would be exclusively

23. Peter Lev, *History of the America Cinema: The Fifties, Transforming the Screen 1950-1959* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 2006), 16.

24. Lev, *History of the American Cinema*, 17.

25. Lev, 198.

26. Lev, 199.

27. Lev, *History of the America Cinema*, 107, 226; Neil Sinyard, *A Wonderful Heart: The Films of William Wyler* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), 191; Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics*, 57.

used on *Ben-Hur*, and 65mm film stock to make 70mm print.²⁸ For the cast, MGM hired prestigious film director and producer William Wyler and famous actor Charlton Heston.²⁹ The film crew of *Ben-Hur* was comprised of three production units.³⁰ The first unit, led by William Wyler and cinematographer Robert L. Surtees, filmed the dialogue.³¹ The second unit, led by director Andrew Marton and cinematographer Piero Portalupi filmed the set pieces and chariot race.³² Finally, the third unit, led by director Richard Thorpe and cinematographer Harold E. Wellman, filmed the sea battle.³³ *Ben-Hur* was both the most expensive and successful film ever made at this time.³⁴ The success of the film was due to the improvement in spectacle, specifically in its camera work, from its previous iteration. This is demonstrated in the increased attention to the chariot race and Roman triumph, such as added attention to dangerous curves and a longer celebration (4-minutes) with six thousand extras.³⁵ Nonetheless, like the previous *Ben-Hur* films, the success of Wyler's remake is also attributed to the fact that the feature was designed to appeal to the mindset of the time.

During the 1950s, Christianity within the US was more popular than ever due to American political and social leaders using religion as a form of weapon against the influences of Communism.³⁶ Additionally, the film industry was experiencing a renaissance in film technology as studios were competing with television for viewer attendance. This resulted in the creation of numerous big-budget biblical epics that implemented state-of-the-art film equipment,

28. Lev, *History of the America Cinema*, 226; Hall & Neale, *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters*, 153.

29. Lev, *History of the American Cinema*, 199.

30. Lev, 226.

31. Lev, 226.

32. Lev, 226.

33. Lev, 226.

34. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 1.

35. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 75, 765.

36. Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics*, 57.

such as Cinemascope in *The Robe* and Vista Vision in *The Ten Commandments*. Wyler's film embodied these elements while also promoting anti-tyranny and religious messages, themes that were also popular due to the past war with Nazi Germany and the persistent threat of Communism.³⁷ Ultimately the film, like its predecessor would become a global hit.

The Marketing of the Films

Before diving into the advertisements for the film it is important to understand how one of the first iterations of the story, the play, was advertised, as future marketing strategies would later be implemented. By the time the Klaw & Erlanger play was being assembled, the majority of America was still devout Christians who were easily offended by anything that might have been perceived as sacrilegious. To add to this, many citizens had never seen a play and perceived the theatre as sinful, such as the American Tract Society, which proclaimed the theatre as a school of vice.³⁸ Thus, like Harper & Brothers, the company developed a marketing campaign that would encourage Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, to see the play.³⁹ Headed by their business manager and advance agent Charles Towle and Edward B. Cooke, the marketing team developed several strategies to get people into the theatre.⁴⁰ The first form of advertisement was the use of Christian religious authority to reassure the public and endorse the play.⁴¹ Among these was an advertisement in the *Elmira Gazette* about a clergy member's change in attitude after seeing *Ben-Hur*, an endorsement by leading Evangelist Billy Sunday, and public approvals by both Protestant and Catholic leaders (Episcopal Bishop Henry Codman and Roman Catholic

37. Lev, *History of the America Cinema*, 227.

38. Barbara Ryan and Milette Shamir, *Bigger Than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptation, and Their Audiences* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 92, 104.

39. E.C. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*: Dynamics of Emotions in Texts, Reception Contexts, and Audience Responses in the United States (1880-1931)," (doctoral thesis, University College London, 2016), 151, 154, <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1474927/>.

40. Ryan and Shamir, *Bigger Than Ben-Hur*, 93.

41. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 151.

Archbishop Cardinal James Gibbons).⁴² Additionally, Klaw and Erlanger also used religious authority outside of Christianity to convince non-Christians to attend, such as an endorsement by Rabbi Samuel Hirschberg of the Temple Shaion that was circulated throughout Yiddish newspapers.⁴³ The second form of advertisement used was presenting the play as being carefully constructed to honor religious stories and teachings. One example of this was the company's decision not to cast an actor to play Jesus Christ, and instead use a radiant shaft of light to represent his spirit.⁴⁴ The reason behind this was that many Christians saw Jesus Christ as impossible to portray, as he was believed to be a divine being, whereas mankind was sinful.⁴⁵ Klaw and Erlanger also promised not to perform *Ben-Hur* on Sundays, even going so far as to not have any of their shows play on the day.⁴⁶ The third advertising strategy was to proclaim the play as being divine itself.⁴⁷ This included crediting the success of the play to the spirit of Christ being present during the production and shows, comparing the play to a sermon, and announcing the power of the play to convert individuals (including members of the cast, such as dramatist William Young).⁴⁸ Finally, Klaw and Erlanger used the new ideology that the Gospel can be conveyed visually to sell their production.⁴⁹ It's also important to note that other than the religious advertisements, the company promoted the creation of the play, especially the sophisticated treadmill used during the chariot race.⁵⁰ However, during this stage in the life of the *Ben-Hur* franchise, America was more concerned with respecting religious authority and

42. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 151; Ryan and Shamir, *Bigger than Ben-Hur*, 96 & 109.

43. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 155.

44. Ryan and Shamir, *Bigger Than Ben-Hur*, 94.

45. Ryan and Shamir, 92.

46. Ryan and Shamir, 97.

47. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 151.

48. Ryan and Shamir, *Bigger Than Ben-Hur*, 95; Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 151.

49. Ryan and Shamir, *Bigger Than Ben-Hur*, 98.

50. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 166.

teachings than creating spectacles. Surprisingly, Kalem decided not to advertise the religious aspect of *Ben-Hur* for their film. The reason for this was that Klaw & Erlanger had already dedicated some much time and resources to marketing the religious aspects of the play, and thus Kalem did not need to make this claim in their advertisements. This decision was made to avoid giving the play company, Harper & Brothers, and the Wallace estate any royalties. Because of this, Kalem could focus on simply marketing the spectacular qualities of the picture.

The advertisements for the 1907 *Ben-Hur* relied on the excitement of the story, specifically the chariot race, and the complex production. This is evident in advertisements by Kalem in *The Moving Picture World* featuring drawings of racing quadrigas.⁵¹ Chow-Kambitsch also sights *The Moving Picture World* as hosting advertisements for the film that promised to deliver a spectacular narrative⁵² Solomon includes an advertisement where Kalem promoted their *Ben-Hur* picture as “Positively the Most Superb Moving Picture Spectacle Ever Produced in America” accompanied by exciting images from the film, such as Ben Hur, victorious at the chariot race.⁵³ Lastly, Solomon also notes that advertisements in *The Moving Picture World* contained many superlatives regarding the greatness of the picture.⁵⁴ While the 1907 film’s advertising campaign would be cut short due to the legal dispute, Goldwyn would have enough time and plenty of resources to properly promote their feature.

Taking after Kalem’s briefly successful advertising campaign, Goldwyn would also market the spectacular aspects of their upcoming film. For the advertising, Goldwyn promoted the large scale of the production, specifically the large cast, set, and production costs, as well as the arduous effort that went into making the film. This attention to largeness and difficulty of the

51. Unknown Author, “Ben Hur,” *The Moving Picture World*, January 11, 1908, 49.

52. Chow-Kambitsch, “An Alternative ‘Roman Spectacle’,” 205.

53. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 538.

54. Solomon, 133, 539.

feature can be seen throughout *Variety*, *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Picture Play Magazine*.

First, in the 1925 March issue of *Photoplay*, journalist Herbert Howe speculated that the cost of *Ben-Hur* will be three million dollars.⁵⁵ On October 7, 1925, *Variety* reported that 3,500 extras were used during the chariot race.⁵⁶ *Picture Play Magazine* also mentions how 3 million dollars was spent in Italy in their 1925 November issue.⁵⁷ Additionally, in a report by Ruth Waterbury in the March 1926 issue of *Photoplay*, she describes the picture as a modern miracle film in part due to the complexity of the production.⁵⁸ Finally, in the 1926 March production notes of *The Education Screen*, journalist Marguerite Orndorf discussed how *Ben-Hur* features one of the greatest mob scenes in the history of the film industry (thousands of extras).⁵⁹ Solomon also lists advertisements that promoted the grandness and expense of the picture, such as Gordon Hillman in *The Advertiser* promoting the 4 million dollar budget of the film and MGM stating that they included five hundred school children for the crowds at the end of the crucifixion.⁶⁰ All of these reports indicate that the MGM press wanted to advertise to the public the amount of excess involved in the upcoming film. With reports of the film costing a fortune or hundreds of extras being used, the picture came off as a grand production that had never been undertaken before in human history. As a result, these reports enticed people into seeing a monumental work of filmmaking. As for the difficulty of the production, MGM also made an effort to publicize the struggle they endured to create the impressive feature.

55. Herbert Howe, "Close-Ups and Long-Shots," *Photoplay*, March 1925, 223.

56. Unknown Author, "3,500 Extras in 'Ben-Hur'," *Variety*, October 7, 1925, 1, 34.

57. Don Ryan, "The Baby Spot," *Picture Play Magazine*, November 1925, 94.

58. Ruth Waterbury, "A Modern Miracle Film," *Photoplay*, March 1926, 31-32.

59. Marguerite Orndorf, "Production Notes for March," *The Educational Screen*, March 1926, 168.

60. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 585.

In January of 1926, *American Cinematographer* featured a segment on the filming of the chariot race and the various cameras and equipment used.⁶¹ Later in that same issue was another article discussing the making of *Ben-Hur*, this one discussing the editing involved in the feature.⁶² The significance of the chariot race is also mentioned in the 1926 issue of *Picture Play Magazine* where Woolridge discusses the scale of the set and the many extras involved.⁶³ Other than the difficult and expensive production, the industry also noted the amount of effort put into getting the perfect cast, such as the production hunt for the perfect person to play the Virgin Mary.⁶⁴ As Solomon adds, the production spent months looking for the perfect person to play Mother Mary/The Madonna and hundreds of women were interviewed and screened.⁶⁵ Once again, these reports by journalists and the MGM press cast *Ben-Hur* as a spectacle unlike anything the world had ever seen. Not only was the grand expense part of the Spectacle, but so was the human effort and dedication involved in making the film. Though the 1959 *Ben-Hur* film would also have extensive advertising centered around spectacle, part of the focus of what made it spectacular had changed.

While the advertising for the 1959 epic was also focused on the largeness of the picture, it appears that there was more attention paid to the film technology used during the production. Throughout the *International Projectionist*, the film equipment of *Ben-Hur* is either referenced or advertised several times. In the January 1960 issue, it is discussed how the 70mm gauge of

61. George Meehan, "Filming 'Ben Hur' Chariot Race Scenes," *American Cinematographer*, January 1926, 5-6.

62. William R. Swigart, "The Great Task of Editing 'Ben Hur'," *American Cinematographer*, January 1926, 12.

63. A.L. Woolridge, "The Ben-Hur Chariot Race," *Picture Play Magazine*, January 1926, 20-21.

64. Unknown Author, "Studio News and Gossip," *Photoplay*, June 1925, 42; Myrtle Gebhart, "Why is a Screen Test?," *Picture Play Magazine*, January 1926, 105.

65. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 582.

Ben-Hur was designed to be an attraction.⁶⁶ Later in April of 1960, the magazine featured an advertisement for *Ben-Hur* being projected by the Norelco Universal 70/35mm projector in 36 major theatres.⁶⁷ In August the magazine once again discussed the film equipment behind *Ben-Hur*, showing an image of the constellation 170 arc lamp used for the projection of *Ben-Hur*.⁶⁸ While there was extensive advertising covering the technology involved in making the film, a byproduct of the film technology-driven time, there were still advertisements for its grand scale. A *Time*'s Review of the film promoted the fact that it used 400 actors, 10000 extras 100,000 costumes, and 300 sets in the making of the picture and that the chariot race took 18 acres and a year to make.⁶⁹ Additionally, MGM's public relations representative Morgan Hudgins told the *New York Times* that *Ben-Hur* was both the most expensive and ambitious film ever made.⁷⁰ MGM also circulated press books that stated the one-million-dollar expense of the chariot race.⁷¹

The advertising of expense, size, labor, and technology for these films are features that have continued into the modern era. Today, film journals and magazines, along with numerous other new platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TV, Yahoo, and YouTube, regularly advertise the latest spectacular feature, whether it be through numerous trailers or videos, and articles discussing the technology and production of the films. Yet even with all these new means of advertising, the message remains the same: go see the newest and most sensational picture to have your senses stimulated. While advertising was a critical component in the marketing of the

66. Unknown Author, "Exhibitors Group Urges Early Release of 70-mm in 35-mm," *International Projectionist*, January 1960, 16.

67. Unknown Author, "In 41 Major Theatres Showing Ben-Hur 36 of Them are Equipped with Norelco Universal 70/35 mm Projector," *International Projectionist*, April 1960, 7.

68. Unknown Author, "SMPTE Gets USOE Grant," *International Projectionist*, August 1960, 17.

69. Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics*, 72.

70. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 767.

71. Solomon, 767.

Ben-Hur films, the use of famous actors, actresses, and even directors, also helped sell the pictures.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the star system in the film industry had not been established. Films were sold on brand name alone, with viewers requesting films by the name of the company that made them, not the celebrity that was in them or the title of the picture.⁷² While the theatre, opera, and vaudeville greatly marketed the star system, the film business did not consider stars a critical factor, since, to producers, it hardly mattered who showed up in a series of photographs.⁷³ As a result, there were few consistently employed actors and actresses.⁷⁴ Because of this the actors and actresses in the film industry during this time tended to be lower-ranking theatre professionals seeking extra work while waiting for a new season to begin.⁷⁵ They were hired by day and paid five dollars.⁷⁶ Additionally, up until 1912, many actors and actresses, including the more famous and accomplished, did not want to work in film, as the industry was considered far less prestigious than theatre, and thus working on a film could harm their reputation and future salaries.⁷⁷ With this in mind, it is no surprise that there is no marketing for any actor or actress in Kalem's *Ben-Hur*. Instead, Kalem promoted the names of well-known companies and production artists involved in the making of the film.⁷⁸ However, by the time the 1925 film released the attention to film actors had drastically changed.

While most of the first decade of the 20th century featured little to no recognition of the actors and actresses in films, the industry's growing popularity helped to foster a fanbase for

72. Bowser, *History of American Cinema*, 105.

73. Bowser, 106.

74. Bowser, 106.

75. Bowser, 106.

76. Bowser, 106, 110.

77. Bowser, 106-7.

78. Unknown Author, "Ben Hur," *The Moving Picture World*, January 11, 1908, 49.

some of the cast members, with many sending in questions, photographs to be signed, and even marriage proposals.⁷⁹ While the studios initially resisted giving attention to their actors and actresses, as they could demand more money to appear in pictures, they soon realized the power of star exploitation in marketing.⁸⁰ By the beginning of the second decade, fan magazines began to emerge and trade periodicals such as *The Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture World Magazine*, and *New York Dramatic Mirror* started to incorporate inquiries and answers to inquiries sections for curious fans.⁸¹ Magazines also featured star popularity polls and gossip about the roles and personal lives of these actors and actresses, such as Wallace Reid's struggles with alcohol and morphine.⁸² Because of all this, Goldwyn realized that they not only needed star players but also a marketing campaign to advertise their significance in the film.

Ramon Novarro was cast as the lead protagonist, Ben Hur, due to his already established fan network along with his sex appeal among female audience members.⁸³ This is demonstrated in the Ramon Novarro Film Club that was around at the time, along with public announcements of fans, 'or Ramonites, interest and dedication to the actor, such as one Ramonite's message to *Picture Play Magazine* asking if she could interview Novarro.⁸⁴ As for his sex appeal, many advertisements showcased his physique to attract female audiences, one of the earliest uses of using sex to sell a product. In one advertisement in the "Exhibitor's Trade Review", Novarro is pictured as an almost completely naked galley slave⁸⁵ Additionally, several magazines encouraged women to perceive the women who share the screen with Ramon as themselves,

79. Bowser, *History of American Cinema*, 107.

80. Bowser, 108-9.

81. Bowser, 114-17.

82. Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 260, 276-78.

83. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 226.

84. Lord-Kambitsch, 225, 228.

85. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 226.

displaying images with Ramon holding Iras in his arms.⁸⁶ MGM's decision to cast famous actors and actresses was wise, as they now had the allegiance of their fanbases. Yet, while Novarro and other popular cast members helped popularize the feature just by their presence, Goldwyn still needed to convince audiences of how they were significant in the film.

To promote the celebrities starring in *Ben-Hur*, various cast members were photographed in and outside of costume and conducted interviews with journalists and critics. One of the first examples of this advertising for the film can be seen in the March 1925 *Photoplay* issue, which showed a large image of May McAvoy in their "New Pictures" segment (noting that she will be playing Esther).⁸⁷ Later in the April issue of *Photoplay*, Hebert Howe wrote an article discussing his time with Novarro and how he feels he is one of the greatest actors of the time.⁸⁸ Along with this description was an image of Novarro dressed as Ben Hur.⁸⁹ In the August issue of *Photoplay*, they once again showed an image of May McAvoy in the "New Pictures" section, noting that she will be playing Esther.⁹⁰ The September 1925 issue of *Picture Play Magazine* had an article, "The Girlfriend Makes Good," discussing Kathleen Key's early career and future in *Ben-Hur* along with an image of the actress.⁹¹ Lastly, the March 1926 issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* also showed an image of Novarro in the Ben Hur costume in their "Portrait Gallery", noting that his performance was great in the film.⁹² In addition to advertising the celebrities, MGM also used the actors to advertise several *Ben-Hur* products. This was especially the case for Jergens' *Ben-Hur* perfume, which featured endorsements and images of the actors in

86. Lord-Kambitsch, 229-30.

87. Henry Warhan, "Esther in Ben-Hur," *Photoplay*, March 1925, 24.

88. Herbert Howe, "Ramon Novarro in Europe," *Photoplay*, April 1925, 58.

89. Howe, "Ramon Novarro in Europe," 59.

90. Clarence S. Bull, "New Pictures," *Photoplay*, August 1925, 25.

91. Dorothy Manners, "The Girl Friend Makes Good," *Picture-Play Magazine*, September 1925, 42-43.

92. Ruth Harriet Louise, "Our Portrait Gallery," *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 25, 1926, 19.

costumes, including Carmel Myers and May McAvoy.⁹³ Solomon also notes that Novarro was used for the perfume ads, stating that in one advertisement he notes the power of perfume “when combined with the beauty of women.”⁹⁴ Ultimately, MGM’s casting of star actors and actresses, along with the various articles and advertisements that presented them as perfectly fit for their roles, helped sell *Ben-Hur* as a spectacular production. Later, MGM would also implement stardom to help sell the 1959 *Ben-Hur*.

The first and most prestigious celebrity to be brought onto the project was the director himself, William Wyler. Wyler was hesitant to direct the feature, as he correctly assumed that many of the more avant-garde filmmakers and critics would never forgive him for helping to create a commercial picture.⁹⁵ However, he ultimately decided to work on the project due to his desire to make a film about the freedom of Jewish people from oppression and tyranny.⁹⁶ This was a relevant and personal matter for Wyler as the holocaust had happened less than a decade and a half ago.⁹⁷ As for Heston, Wyler and the studio were drawn toward casting him due to his previous success and recognition as the biblical character Moses in *The Ten Commandments*.⁹⁸ Because of this, Charlton Heston did press interviews and addresses at universities (including Harvard and Boston).⁹⁹ Additionally, several stars of the picture, including Stephen Boyd, Haya Harareet, and Heston, were featured in newspaper segments and made television appearances to promote the film.¹⁰⁰

93. Lord-Kambitsch, “Emotions in *Ben Hur*,” 231-232.

94. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 639.

95. Sinyard, *A Wonderful Heart*, 181-82.

96. Sinyard, 181-82.

97. Sinyard, 181-82.

98. Lev, *History of American Cinema*, 199.

99. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 773.

100. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 772-73.

Looking at the present, star actors are still, if not more, important to selling films. Magazines and television shows such as *People*, *Us*, *Stars*, *Extra*, and *Access Hollywood* are completely dedicated to talking about these individuals' lives and work. As a result, the two *Ben-Hur* films helped shift the industry into this star craze. Finally, other than advertisements and celebrities, the *Ben-Hur* series has had a diverse and successful line of products.

The *Ben-Hur* franchise is unique due to having a long and successful line of merchandise that would inspire the products of other franchises. Even before the release of the films, the *Ben-Hur* brand had sold numerous books surrounding the original novel and play, including *The Boyhood of Christ* (1985), the Garfield Edition of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* (1892), *The Chariot Race from Ben-Hur* (1908), *Seekers After "The Light"* (1902), *The First Christmas* (1902), *Ben-Hur: The Player's Edition* (1903), and Klaw and Erlanger's souvenir album of the play.¹⁰¹ The novel itself would go on to sell 1 million copies before Harper & Brothers and Wallace made a book deal with Sears in 1913, where another million copies would be sold.¹⁰² Additionally, because the U.S. law did not allow trademarking or brand-naming intellectual property in the 1880s, many other companies used the well-known name for their products such as Moebs' *Ben-Hur* cigars (sold 7 million cigars in 1891) and *Ben-Hur* chewing tobacco, flour, tomatoes, soap, perfume, razors, coffee and tea, almost all of which were advertised on billboards and in newspapers and were never approved by Harper or Wallace.¹⁰³ Other than food and tobacco products, there were also *Ben-Hur* bicycles, sold by Central Cycle Manufacturing and Monarch Bicycle Company, and rollercoasters, located in California, England, and Kansas.¹⁰⁴ Though

101. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 5, 138, 141-42; Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 152, 160, 161.

102. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 1.

103. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 1, 5, 425, 428-47.

104. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 457-58, 461-80.

copyright restrictions would eventually do away with most of these unlicensed products, there would still be numerous and varying *Ben-Hur* products sold during future films.

While the studio behind the 1907 iteration had neither the resources nor time to sell products, as they were a new company that was hit with a massive lawsuit shortly after the film's release, the 1925 *Ben-Hur* by MGM was able to sell and license several products under the brand name. One of the most advertised of these products was the Jergens *Ben-Hur* perfume. The extensive advertising can be seen in *Photoplay* from November 1925 to January 1926, where Camel Myers, captured in her Iras costume on the set of *Ben-Hur*, acts as the brand's spokesperson, claiming the perfume is "exquisite" and "distinctive."¹⁰⁵ Additionally, from October to December of 1926 the perfume company Jergens circulated an advertisement for *Ben-Hur* perfume in *photoplay* with May McAvoy endorsing the product.¹⁰⁶ Other than perfume, Hebert Howe in the "Close-Ups and Long-Shots" section of *Photoplay* mentioned that *Ben-Hur* soap was being sold, noting that the sale of such a product might help sell the picture.¹⁰⁷ After the release of the 1925 *Ben-Hur*, several companies sold watches under the *Ben-Hur* name. In August of 1926, the Gruen Watch company sold the *Ben-Hur* bracelet, a wrist attachment for their watches.¹⁰⁸ Later in 1927, the Western Clock company released a *Ben-Hur* alarm clock with a metal base.¹⁰⁹ MGM also made *Ben-Hur* trading cards which were sold in Europe and included

105. Unknown Author, "The Perfume Ben-Hur which Carmel Myers Finds so Distinctive," *Photoplay*, November 1925, 89-90; Unknown Author, "Why Carmel Myers, Appearing in *Ben-Hur*, Admires the Perfume of that Name," *Photoplay*, December 1925, 90; Unknown Author, "Studio News and Gossip," *Photoplay*, January 91.

106. Lord-Kambitsch, "Emotions in *Ben Hur*," 231.

107. Unknown Author, *Photoplay*, August 1925; Herbert Howe, "Close-Ups and Long-Shots," *Photoplay*, August, 1925, 110.

108. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 480.

109. Solomon, 480.

images of Ben-Hur at sea, the chariot race, and Mother Mary.¹¹⁰ Much like its predecessor, the 1959 *Ben-Hur* would also have a massive merchandising campaign, becoming the most merchandised film up until that point in Hollywood's history.

To begin with, unlike its predecessors the 1959 *Ben-Hur* would market several lines of toys. This included plastic swords and helmets, statues, playsets, painting sets, and board games by Stone Associates, as well as model kits by Adams Action Models.¹¹¹ To add to this, MGM also partnered with *Golden Press* to publish a punch-out book for children.¹¹² MGM also made a deal with the Hall-Marx company to produce clothing tie-ins for children and teens, including shorts, raincoats, dresses, and blouses.¹¹³ As for literature, Harper & Brother sold reprints of Wallace's novel, including a deluxe edition.¹¹⁴ Additionally, several comic book companies, including *Classics Illustrated*, *National Comics*, and *Dell*, created visual versions or tie-ins to the stories, such as "Superboy Meets Ben-Hur!"¹¹⁵ Lastly, MGM records sold the music of *Ben-Hur* in several albums, including a two-pocket LP, a single LP, and a budget LP.¹¹⁶

The marketing practices of *Ben-Hur* products have had a tremendous impact on modern merchandising. Before the making of the films, the idea of creating food products, rollercoasters, and bikes centered around a fictional work was being implemented under the *Ben-Hur* name. Today modern film properties have continued this practice, including the past partnership between Lucasfilms and Taco Bell in releasing *Star Wars* products, rollercoasters based on films such as *Jurassic Park*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter*, and bicycles designed after Marvel's

110. Solomon, 611-12.

111. Solomon, 799, 802.

112. Solomon, 803.

113. Solomon, 799.

114. Solomon, 791.

115. Solomon, 795.

116. Solomon, 797.

Spiderman and *The Avengers*. As for the *Ben-Hur* products sold around the times of the films, such as the Jergens perfume, Hall-Marx clothing, and toys by Stone Associates, later franchises would also adopt and expand open these practices. This can be seen through the *Star Wars* toy line (which has sold millions of products over 44 years), *Star Wars* perfume, and horror film apparel by Fright-Rags. Because of this, the *Ben-Hur* franchise helped establish a precedent for the merchandising of future film products.

The Fandom and Industry Discourse

Since the early days of the *Ben-Hur* franchise, the story had maintained some form of following. In the late 19th century Wallace received a plethora of fan mail praising his novel.¹¹⁷ However, among the admirers was a group willing to take their devotion to the next level. The Tribe of Ben-Hur, a fraternal organization that would later become USA Life One Insurance, asked Wallace for both advice and to inaugurate the order.¹¹⁸ Wallace both supported and consulted the tribe, even suggesting that they change their original name from the Knights of Ben-Hur to Tribe of Ben-Hur as there were no knights during the period his story takes place.¹¹⁹ The tribe, wanting to honor the heroism and brotherly love found in the Ben Hur character, held fundraisers called “chariots.”¹²⁰ In the 1920s, MGM would advertise their upcoming *Ben-Hur* epic by appealing to preexisting fan bases like The Tribe of Ben-Hur, such as letting members of the Tribe come to the filming and either see some of the production or work as an extra.¹²¹ Other than fandom, the *Ben-Hur* series also helped establish Hollywood discourse surrounding major

117. Lord-Kambitsch, “Emotions in *Ben Hur*,” 87.

118. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 3, 31, 413, 423.

119. Solomon, 413.

120. Solomon, 411.

121. Lord-Kambitsch, “Emotions in *Ben Hur*,” 225.

studio features. This is evident from the release of the first *Ben-Hur* film to Wyler's third iteration.

The discussions surrounding the 1907 *Ben-Hur* copyright battle would prove to be one of the very first publicly-known film dramas. According to several reports from *Variety*, *The Moving Picture World*, and *The Nickelodeon*, the legal battle initiated by Henry Wallace, Klaw and Erlanger, and Harper and Brothers was unlike anything people had seen. *Variety* follows the suit for nearly a year (1908-1909) reporting on new updates on the state of the case, such as in May of 1908 when they announced that the District Court ruled against Kalem, followed by a report in March of 1920 where the Circuit Court also decided against the film company.¹²² *The Moving Picture World* also reports on the matter in their Trade Notes section, stating that an injunction was asked against the production.¹²³ Finally, in *The Nickelodeon*, journalist K.S. Hover detailed in length the cases being made by the four warring parties, specifically how Kalem lost due to a projection of pictures being considered an on-stage performance.¹²⁴ While the 1925 film did not suffer from any copyright issues, its tumultuous production would prove to be a major source of publicity.

As academy award-winning film preservationist Kevin Brownlow described, *Ben-Hur* was a "heroic fiasco."¹²⁵ The long follow-up to the release of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* was filled with gossip and discussions surrounding the making of the picture. To begin with, many film journalists were concerned with whether the production would ever wrap up, as the

122. Unknown Author, "Film Makers Must Pay for Copyrighted Productions", *Variety*, May 9, 1908; Unknown Author, "Picture Notes – Kalem Co. Beaten," *Variety*, March 20, 1909, 11.

123. Unknown Author, "Trade Notes- 'Injunction Asked Against the Production of a Roman Spectacle'," *The Moving Picture World*, March 21, 1908, 223.

124. K.S. Hover, "The Ben Hur Case," *The Nickelodeon*, September 1909, 72; K.S. Hover, "The 'Ben-Hur' Copyright Case," *The Nickelodeon*, September, 1909, 81-82.

125. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 567.

production troubles had caused numerous delays. The *Motion Picture Magazine* noted in its “What’s New in the Screen World,” that journalists and critics were worried about the film and its release.¹²⁶ Additionally, recurring reports of the troubles surrounding the production added to the public’s concern, such as the report in the 1925 issue of *Photoplay* by Cal York on how Carmel Myers, Iras, was detained by Paris police.¹²⁷ In a report from the “Studio News and Gossip- East and West” section of *Photoplay*, it was noted that actress Mae Murray left the production, proclaiming she was miserable on it.¹²⁸ Murray was not the only one to abandon the production, as June Mathis, the writer and producer, would also leave.¹²⁹ Later, in the 1925 August issue, the magazine listed several issues adding to the controversy of the *Ben-Hur* production, such as the numerous directors and growing production cost.¹³⁰ Finally, reports of the disastrous naval battle filming, that possibly caused the death of several Italian extras, and the deaths of several horses during the chariot race made *Ben-Hur* look like a production disaster.¹³¹ With all these distressing factors in the minds of the film industry, there was concern among the press that if the film was ever released it may not be able to make the money back.¹³²

126. Unknown Author, “What’s New in the Screen World,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, February 1926, 66-67.

127. Cal York, “Studio News and Gossip East and West,” *Photoplay*, February 1925, 60.

128. Unknown Author, “Studio News and Gossip- East and West,” *Photoplay*, February 1925, 42.

129. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 576.

130. Unknown Author, “‘Ben Hur,’ a Metro-Goldwyn Picture, is Now in Production at the Metro-Goldwyn Mayer Studios in Culver City, California,” *Photoplay*, August 1925, 82.

131. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 580.

132. Edwin Schallert, “Will ‘Ben-Hur’ Justify its Cost?,” *Picture Play Magazine*, February 1926, 60.

Because of this production drama, the film became a legend in the film world.¹³³ Nevertheless, the production was not the only controversy surrounding the feature.

Other than the production, trade and guild film journals were also filled with gossip surrounding the casts of *Ben-Hur*, especially the main character. Throughout the January 1925 issue of *Photoplay* various journalists, including Conn Hartford and M. Stocking, argued in the “Studio News and Gossip” sections over the casting of Ramon Novarro as *Ben-Hur*, stating that his physique did not match that of the strong *Ben-Hur*.¹³⁴ To them, Novarro was too small and delicate for what a brave hero should appear. To add to this, an article from the “Studio News and Gossip” section of the February issue of *Photoplay* even went so far as to show how actor Francis Bushman, Massala, had to stand in a small ditch when filmed next to Ramon for the two to appear to have similar heights.¹³⁵ Yet, in several messages to the magazine, some fans were in support of Novarro’s casting. *Photoplay* reader Evelyn Panelli believed that Novarro was ideal for the role stating that many have been misinformed on the actual appearance of *Ben-Hur* (instead of being a blond adonis figure, he was written in the book as a seventeen-year-old with more Latin complexions).¹³⁶ Eda Allen also sights the book in support of Novarro playing Ben Hur, explaining how Chapter 2 of Book 2 of *Ben-Hur* gives evidence to Novarro having the right physique.¹³⁷ Another reader, Alice Devine, also thought Ramon was the proper choice, stating that she read *Ben-Hur* and feels that he fits the character description.¹³⁸ Novarro wasn’t the only

133. Unknown Author, “Gossip of the Camera Costs,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 25, 1926, 48.

134. Conn Hartford, “Regarding the Change of Ben Hurs,” *Photoplay*, January 1925, 16; M. Stocking, “An Artist Protests,” *Photoplay*, January 1925, 12, 16, 92.

135. Unknown Author, “Studio News and Gossip,” *Photoplay*, February 1925, 63.

136. Evelyn Panelli, “About Who Should Play Ben Hur,” *Photoplay*, April 1925, 12.

137. Eda Allen, “Proves Novarro is Perfect ‘Ben Hur’,” *Photoplay*, August 1925, 12.

138. Alice Devine, “A Swashbuckling Brave,” *Photoplay*, October 1925, 116.

actor criticized for being cast. In the “Questions and Answers” section of *Photoplay*, many voiced their concern about May McAvoy being cast as Esther, arguing that she was too small.¹³⁹

In addition to the interest in the production issues and cast, the industry and public also seemed more interested in box-office scores and spectacles than the last *Ben-Hur* picture. This focus on the box office is evident in “The Box Office Speaks” section in the May 1926 issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* where it is discussed whether *Ben-Hur* will surpass *The Big Parade*.¹⁴⁰ As for spectacle, *Observer* magazine explained that the film was one of the most talked-about pictures, even a year after its release, with people still talking about the chariot race.¹⁴¹ Though Wyler’s film would also be praised, its period of success would be shorter than its predecessor.

While the 1959 *Ben-Hur* was one of the most successful films of the decade it was not the only giant of the time, and thus was not as talked about as its predecessor. Unlike the 1920s, which had only a few mega spectacle features, such as *Birth of a Nation*, *The Big Parade*, and the 1925 *Ben-Hur*, there were a couple of other popular epic pictures that rivaled Wallace’s film around the time of its release, including *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Spartacus* (1960). In addition, other non-epic pictures would also steal the audiences’ attention shortly after *Ben-Hur*’s release, such as the rerelease of *Gone with the Wind*, which the May 1961 issue of the *International Projectionist* stated as usurping *Ben-Hur* at the box office (8).¹⁴²

The Tribe of Ben-Hur was a forerunner to many clubs and fandoms of future franchises, such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Alien*, *Marvel*, *DC*, and *Game of Thrones*. Like their predecessor, these fandoms would also come together during meetings or events to discuss their love and

139. Unknown Author, “Questions & Answers,” *Photoplay*, July 1925, 103.

140. Unknown Author, “The Box-Office Speaks,” *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 25, 1926, 80.

141. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 610.

142. Unknown Author, “‘Gone with the Wind’ Beats ‘Ben-Hur’,” *International Projectionist*, May 1961, 8.

feelings for the films. However, instead of discussions taking place exclusively through in-person meetings, fans can now socialize with one another over the internet through fan websites, such as TheForce.Net and AVP Galaxy. Nevertheless, the idea of a group of individuals coming together to celebrate a story that they admire or cherish is one that the *Ben-Hur* franchise helped foster. In regards to industry discourse, the news and other related media are still, if not more, obsessed with the creation and controversies surrounding film production and release. Much like the gossip surrounding Novarro's casting as Ben Hur or the debates on whether the 1925 *Ben-Hur* would ever complete production, many news outlets and film buffs have continued this tradition of debating films. This can be seen not only through modern magazines and newspapers, but also websites, such as YouTube where users can create videos discussing and arguing their thoughts and ideas about films.

Reception of the Films

For the short time the Kalem *Ben-Hur* was in the theatre it experienced great success. Correspondences from *Variety* and *The Moving Picture World* report a considerable amount of attention drawn to the film. As Cal Cohen of *Variety* reports, *Ben-Hur* was, "a big money getter."¹⁴³ Additionally, another journalist from *Variety*, Ernest L. Waitt, claimed that *Ben-Hur* was the leading film in the Boston Hub Theatre.¹⁴⁴ In addition to *Variety*, *The Moving Picture World* also reported on the short-lived success of the film. Several reports during February of 1908 mention large crowds waiting to see *Ben-Hur*, with police having to get involved to prevent people from trampling over each other.¹⁴⁵ To add to this, the "Trade Notes" section of the

143. Ernest L. Waitt, "Correspondence – Boston," *Variety*, December 21, 1907, 29.

144. Ernest L. Waitt, "Correspondence – Boston," 25.

145. Unknown Author, "Pictures that Draw," *The Moving Picture World*, February 1, 1908, 76; Unknown Author, "Another Fatality- This Time Criminal," *The Moving Picture World*, February 1, 1908, 80.

magazine reported that the film was a wonderful presentation of Wallace's work and Kinetoscopic art.¹⁴⁶ Chow-Kambitsch confirms these findings in his article, stating that before the controversy following its release, the 1907 *Ben-Hur* was a popular success.¹⁴⁷ For this argument, Chow-Kambitsch also sights information from *Variety* and *The Moving Picture World*, as well as the *Augusta Chronicle*, all of which describe how large audiences went to see the picture and were greatly entertained by it.¹⁴⁸ Solomon also seems to agree that the film was initially successful. He also sights *The Moving Picture World*, noting how one critic from the "Trade Notes" section details the film as a "wonderfully realistic and pleasing presentation."¹⁴⁹ He also documents another review from the magazine centered around the premiere and how everyone was enthralled by the chariot race.¹⁵⁰ Ultimately, the success this film garnered was minimal in comparison to MGM's *Ben-Hur* features.

Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ was a highly lauded picture upon its releases. Journalists throughout the industry noted the flood of positive reviews and incredible financial success the picture was garnering. As *Variety* reported in January of 1926, *Ben-Hur* had a tremendous opening.¹⁵¹ *Motion Picture News* also reported that *Ben-Hur* was creating a sensation among audiences upon release.¹⁵² Additionally, up until March, *Variety* reported that *Ben-Hur* was scoring big at the box office.¹⁵³ *Motion Picture Magazine* later noted the seeming financial triumph of the film, stating that the feature will set new records.¹⁵⁴ However, what is of interest

146. Unknown Author, "Trade Notes," *The Moving Picture World*, February 29, 1908, 159.

147. Chow-Kambitsch, "An Alternative 'Roman Spectacle,'" 209, 214.

148. Chow-Kambitsch, 214.

149. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 542.

150. Solomon, 543.

151. Unknown Author, "Inside Stuff On Pictures," *Variety*, January 6, 1926, 36.

152. Unknown Author, "Speaking Editorially," *Motion Picture News*, January 9, 1926, 152.

153. "Boston's Two Specials," *Variety*, March 3, 1926, 31.

154. Unknown Author, "The Box-Office Speaks," *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 25 1926, 82.

among the positive reviews is what these critics praised about the film. Numerous trade journals throughout the first half of 1926 seem to have praised the film not only for its' engaging story but also the spectacle its grand production had conceived. In several of *Variety*'s issues, critics were noted as commending the picture for its grandeur, stating that *Ben-Hur* represents a new development in picture making and that other films cannot exist on the same level, as it is the "biggest" picture in the world.¹⁵⁵ One critic even doubted that there will ever be a picture that usurps its' importance, comparing it to the Bible itself.¹⁵⁶ *Motion Picture News* also covered the reverence for the production quality. On January 16 of 1926, Journalist William Johnson called *Ben-Hur* a "masterpiece of surpassing beauty and massive settings" and having "an amazing production."¹⁵⁷ However, what is interesting is Johnson's remarks on the film a few days earlier, where he praises *Ben-Hur* for its "spectacle and simple story."¹⁵⁸ In the Theatrical Field section of *The Educational Screen*, Marguerite Orndorf discusses how the *Ben-Hur* film is "even more spectacular" than the play version, detailing how the scenes featuring giant sets, such as the naval battle and chariot race, are thrilling.¹⁵⁹ Finally, Sally Benson from *Picture Play Magazine* praised the "mammoth sets" as an important part of the feature.¹⁶⁰ What is fascinating about these comments is that they are partially geared toward the production aspect of the film. They are enthralled by the style of the film vs its substances. This is especially evident in Johnson's comments where he explains that his love for the film is due to its simple narrative and grand

155. Unknown Author, "'Ben-Hur and Censoring'," *Variety*, January 6, 1926, 18; Unknown Author, "Inside Stuff On Pictures," *Variety*, January 6, 1926, 37.

156. Sime Sullivan, "'Ben-Hur' –Greatest Picture," *Variety*, January 6, 1926, 38.

157. William A. Johnson, "An Editor on Broadway," *Motion Picture News*, January 16, 1926, 258-261.

158. William A. Johnson, "Speaking Editorially," *Motion Picture News*, January 9, 1926, 152.

159. Marguerite Orndorf, "The Theatrical Field," *The Educational Screen*, September 1926, 415.

160. Sally Benson, "The Screen in Review- The Triumph of the Season 'Ben-Hur'," *Picture Play Magazine*, March 1926, 61.

production. This preference for giant spectacle features with simplistic and easily understandable plots is very much akin to those of the modern era. After the success of *Ben-Hur*, many critics would go on to compare other films' levels of spectacle and production to the feature, such as Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels*, Universal's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *The Trail of '98*.¹⁶¹ However the critical success of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* would be usurped by its future iteration. The 1959 *Ben-Hur* was a great achievement for MGM, becoming the single most popular epic of the 1950s and winning 11 Oscars including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Color Cinematography, and Best Musical Score.¹⁶² This number was matched by *Titanic* (1997) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), but never exceeded.¹⁶³

The importance given to the success of blockbusters is a phenomenon that is still around since the three *Ben-Hur* features. Just as numerous magazines during the time of the films' release extensively covered the critical and financial triumph of these pictures, so too do newspapers and magazines of today, including *Entertainment Weekly*, *USA Today*, and *Vanity Fair*.¹⁶⁴ In addition to these outlets, websites and television programs such as IMDB, Inside.Com, and Entertainment Tonight are also dedicated to reporting the box office scores.¹⁶⁵ However, what is different between now and the past eras is how the level of reverence given to blockbuster success has turned into an obsession, leading to much of this data being factually incorrect.¹⁶⁶ Many news outlets and film distribution companies are owned by the same parent

161. Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster*, 623.

162. Lev, *History of American Cinema*, 199, 227.

163. Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics*, 67.

164. Stringer, *Movie Blockbusters*, 63.

165. Stringer, 63.

166. Stringer, 64.

company, such as Disney, Time Warner, and Sony.¹⁶⁷ Because of this, the information within these magazines can be greatly influenced. As Stringer explains, it is not uncommon for two film distribution chiefs to make a deal of who gets to report the top film of a season when both of their films are running neck and neck at the box office.¹⁶⁸

Conclusion

The marketing campaign, discourse, fandom, and monumental success of the 1925 and 59 *Ben-Hur*, along with the initial advertising and popularity of the 1907 picture, helped the industry in its transformation into a blockbuster-focused business. While other mega pictures played a part in this development, the *Ben-Hur* series is special due to its long history in American culture. After looking at the marketing, discussions, and reception surrounding these pictures, it can be seen how the industry slowly became blockbuster oriented, specifically how audiences and journalists became more and more focused on production value and special effects, merchandising became more profuse and diverse (going from just selling books to marketing food, beauty, and toy-related products), and actors and actresses became critical components in marketing big-budget films. Because of this, the films perfectly encapsulate the gradual change in the industry's interest toward blockbuster pictures throughout three eras. Now looking at the present, it can be better understood how the desire to make these films along with the marketing, discourse, fandom, and success surrounding them are connected to those of today. What has changed between the three decades and now is the interest of the public. While audiences were previously invested in stories centered around Christian characters and themes, today viewers are drawn more to science fiction and fiction tales, what was previously

167. Stringer, *Movie Blockbusters*, 64; Lewis, *Looking Past the Screen*, 62.

168. Stringer, *Movie Blockbusters*, 64.

considered genres of B movies.¹⁶⁹ Many of these science-fiction and action films were either canonical or spiritual sequels of one another, such as *The Temple of Doom* (1984), *The Last Crusade* (1989), *The Mummy* (1999), and *Lara Croft* (2001) being canonical and spiritual successors to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.¹⁷⁰ As for the blockbusters outside of these categories, these features tend to be disaster movies, war dramas, and comedies, such as *Earthquake* (1974), *Deep Impact* (1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Home Alone* (1990), and *The Hangover* (2009).¹⁷¹

Overall, since the release of Wyler's *Ben-Hur*, Hollywood has become blockbuster saturated, with every other film promising to be a feature of wonder and excitement. The success of the past *Ben-Hur* films, especially the MGM features, helped studios and filmmakers realize the importance of big-budget pictures as well as how to create and market them. Along with this, the advancement of technology would give studios better opportunities to connect and market to audiences. With every studio now realizing the significance of blockbuster features in maintaining and advancing their companies, the industry would become engulfed by these pictures. The surplus of blockbusters released every year would result in Hollywood becoming obsessed with the concept of the blockbuster and the marketing, production, and success surrounding these films. Because of all this, the 2016 *Ben-Hur*'s failure at the box office is mostly due to the overabundance of blockbuster pictures. When the previous film iterations of *Ben-Hur* were marketed and released, there was far less competition within the industry. However, by the beginning of the 60s, the industry was beginning to shift towards making more blockbuster pictures, and audience focus and reverence toward particular features was waning.

169. Stringer, *Movie Blockbusters*, 53.

170. Stringer, 66.

171. Stringer, *Movie Blockbusters*, 53; Acland, *American Blockbuster*, 4.

By the 21st century, only the most fantastic and culturally relevant blockbuster features have a chance of success. *Ben-Hur* was no longer relevant and no longer the only franchise giant in the industry, and that is why it failed. Ultimately, the modern era of marketing and examining spectacles is not entirely different from that of the past generations. What has changed is the massive increase in blockbuster production, marketing, and fandom, along with more pre and post-release discourse and greater attention given to audience reception, surrounding these films.

Filmography

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