about cinema are blockbuster and epic. They are cer-
tainly not the same, though they are sometimes used
as if they were. The American Heritage Dictionary de-
fines a blockbuster as: '1. A bomb capable of destroy­
ing a city block'. Well, 'bomb' (= flop) is the very last
thing on the minds of blockbuster aspirants in the film
world. The one indispensable characteristic of the film
blockbuster is that it should cause an explosion at the
world's box-offices, and everything that promotion can
do to bring this about will be allowed for in budgeting.

BUT, IN THE INTERESTS OF FAIRNESS, it is
important to recall such appalling, compara-
tively small films of recent times as Blackball or
Raising Helen or Plots with a View. These are films so
keen on being winsomely small-scale that they excite
curmudgeonly resistance to being won over.

But in recent times it's the big films that have caused
most complaint. And what exactly do I mean by 'big'?
Two terms that sometimes seem to overlap in writing
for that matter, small stupid films'. It's easy to express
dissatisfaction with the big spectacular jobs which are my main
subject here.

DOESN'T MATTER:
The title for this essay might have been extended by adding
and, for that matter, small stupid films'. It's easy to express
dissatisfaction with the big spectacular jobs which are my main
subject here.
The American Heritage Dictionary defines a blockbuster as: '1. A bomb capable of destroying a city block.'
The same dictionary gives, as a secondary meaning of the term, 'Anything of devastating effect', and perhaps this is where the overlap with epic may be seen to occur. The epic, in film terms, is above all a big-scale affair, often concerned with 'devastating effects' as part of its plotline, even if the result from a critical standpoint is all too often considerably less than devastating. Epics have been around in film history since the teens when D.W. Griffith was making The Birth of a Nation (1915) and Intolerance (1916), films embracing a central action of major significance in human affairs, on a scale that remains impressive as much for intellectual grasp as for cinematic genius. A film epic is one that not merely makes money, as any common or garden blockbuster might, but one that grapples with a conception of real magnitude and invokes the resources of the cinema with precision and imaginative power.

And how often does that happen? In recent times, such films could be counted on the fingers of a damaged hand. In case this seems unduly severe, I should make clear what has informed my thinking about epics. In literary terms, the idea of the epic poem can be traced back to classical Greece and the oral tradition, and did director Wolfgang Petersen (of Troy, 2004) or his screenwriter David Benioff really go back to Homer, to the world of The Odyssey and The Iliad? That is to say, to a world that so magnificently meshes the quotidian with the spiritual? Meshes the world of men, recognizably heroic and ordinary, with the world of the gods, arbitrary and omnipotent? To jump a couple of millennia, Milton's Paradise Lost has no less an aim than to 'assert eternal Providence, /And justify the ways of God to man'. Whether or not you think he achieves this aim, it is undeniable that this (enthralling) work never lets up on its argument—in verse of surpassing grandeur and, when apt, poignancy. Homer ranges over much of the known world in his exploration of man's place in it, and of man's relation to the metaphysical. Milton imagines no less than heaven, hell and the legendary first dwelling-place of man. In drama, the great Shakespearean 'second tetralogy'—Richard II, Henry IV Parts 1 and 2 and Henry V—seems to require the word 'epic' to encompass its massively comprehensive sense of a nation in uneasy peace and triumphant war, a nation at a stage when it might almost be said to be defining itself. (In passing, it is worth noting how many film epics have 'borrowed' from Olivier's wartime version of Henry V, [1944], with its poetic rain of arrows on the ranks of the perfidious French.) Orson Welles's sublime Swiss-Spanish co-production, Chimes at Midnight (1966), inventively drawing on the tetralogy, probably came as near to truly epic stature as any film has, understanding that it was not just a matter of battles and verse but of rendering the passing of one age into another.

In the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht redefined the term 'epic' by describing the sorts of responses his plays were intended to achieve as 'epic theatre'. The essence of his argument was that audiences should be prevented from such emotional involvement in the action of the drama as would preclude their rational, objective, critical reactions to the social conditions that comprised its context. Not even Brecht himself really pulled this off: try watching, say,
Mother Courage or The Caucasian Chalk Circle without feeling emotional commitment. Nevertheless, there is a serious notion of what constitutes the epic here, and it is my contention that filmmakers for the most part have never got beyond a sort of blockbuster attitude to it. It's as though their thinking is along the lines of 'This will cost a fortune to make. How, therefore, do we go about getting back an even bigger fortune?'

Lest anyone think I'm being nostalgic for the great days (whenever they were) of the Hollywood epic, let me say at once that, apart from the Griffith films named, so-called epics were almost always overblown and under-brained. Troy and King Arthur and Alexander don't represent the decline of the American film epic: it was almost always a dud. Having recently viewed/reviewed such elderly exemplars of the genre as The Robe (Henry Koster, 1953), King of Kings (Nicholas Ray) and El Cid (Anthony Mann) – both films released in the same month in the UK in 1961, so the recent rash of titles in Melbourne is nothing new – and with memories of others such as Quo Vadis? (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), The Ten Commandments (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956) and Ben Hur (William Wyler, 1959), all three of which had appeared in earlier versions, I'd say that this was always a doomed genre. With its blockbuster needs in mind, it was never going to be able to concentrate on those aspects of the great literary epics that made them timeless works of art; rather, it would need to focus on spectacle, action and stars. The films seem hardly to have a thought in their heads beyond, say, getting Charlton Heston heroically lit.

Watching and re-watching those older films in the light of the recent rush of epics (and the term is now routinely used for a certain kind of big-budget spectacular), it was instructive to note some of the characteristics they have in common, reinforcing the notion that genre is always empirically and retrospectively defined. 'Defined' is of course scarcely the word to embrace a loose set of conventions and recurring traits, but it will do for the moment. To start with, epics are of course immensely expensive (even disgustingly so when you think to what serious uses those megabucks might have been put), and where the money goes helps the process of...
description. For instance, they are almost invariably over-cast with costly stars who should have known better and a lot of distinguished British supporting actors imported in the vain hope of giving some sort of classic sheen to the enterprise. Vain, that is, because the characterization is generally so thin that there is little for these eclectically chosen players to get their teeth into.

This heterogeneous casting accounts for a lot of the budget and often for the small artistic return; so too does the location shooting which is de rigueur for such films. At various times, Hollywood producers have looked to Britain, Ireland, Spain, Czechoslovakia and New Zealand in search of appropriate backgrounds (and backgrounds are mostly all they are in these films, rarely part of the film’s meaning) and cheaper labour costs. The films invariably run to an inordinate length, as if to numb us into acquiescence, rarely coming within a bull’s roar of earning this length, as if they think size and magnitude were entirely synonymous. In matters of style, contact with the genre can reduce otherwise admirable crafts­men like Anthony Mann and Nicholas Ray to fawning acolytes. By this, I mean such matters as the inevitable solemn voice-over to introduce the epic tone, as Orson Welles does in King of Kings, and/or to comment on the action intermittently to make sure we are not missing the significance. When they touch on religious themes, as they often do, they naively trust in solemnity to distract attention from the absence of any real interest in the spiritual life. Wit, humour, irony, delicacy and grace are abandoned (or were never even considered) in favour of an insistent high portentousness, usually bolstered with a bombastic music score and extravagant production values.

What matters most to film epics is the action sequences, and sometimes they feel like musicals with battles taking the place of song-and-dance numbers. And of course these sequences are well-staged, at least in terms of composition, even if it is quite often unclear in, say, battle scenes just who is doing what harm to whom. It is no longer much of a recommendation to praise the action episodes, especially in these days of computer-enhanced imagery that can fill the screen with armadas or barbarous hordes at the touch of a keyboard. But even in the older films I found myself asking, as the cohorts gazed in the desert sun or whatever, ‘Who are these people? Was the ancient world really so populous? Is there anyone at home minding not just the store but the women and children?’ This is not a sexist remark: the only women one ever sees are either highly-placed temptresses or waxen-looking madonnas. At least, though, in the days of, say, Ben Hur, the crowds were played by real-life extras, so that economic justification in terms of jobs could be advanced. Perhaps, if no one had ever told me about CGI, I wouldn’t have become so sceptical as I watched the hordes readying for battle in Troy.

By now those still reading will be willing to accuse me of prejudice—and they would be right, up to a point. I resent the sheer mad waste of these films. I resent how little there is to show for all the time and effort as well as money that has gone into them. I resent the way they take on big themes and vulgarize and emaciate them in their search for the huge audiences they need and, I fear, often find. Is there anything to be said for the genre, which is now enjoying one of its major boom periods? About some of the science-fiction sub-category—films like Kubrick’s masterly 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), the first Star Wars (1977) — or Kubrick’s Spartacus (1960), which was given some sense of contemporary political relevance, or the Lord of the Rings trilogy, which grapples with the conflict of good and evil on a vast scale, there is a sense of the grandeur of concept which I’d regard as crucial to epic. Too often, though, ‘grandeur of concept’ translates merely as ponderousness of execution.

Obviously such a film as King of Kings is trying hard to be serious about the life of Jesus. But, whatever the filmmaker’s underlying intentions, spiritually or intellectually (and without such intentions it seems hardly worth persevering), the result is vitiated in so many ways. There is an ex­cruci­ating use of heavenly choir to introduce the undertaking, giving way to the usual pompous orchestral lead-up to the opening action; the solemn voice-over narration is full of locutions beginning ‘It is written that . . .’, at once high-sounding and banal; there is the usual bizarre mix of accents, including an Irish Mary (Siobhan McKenna) and an American Christ (Jeffrey Hunter); and there is a rapid run-through of key events in the early life of Jesus (slaughter of the innocents, flight into Egypt, etc). El Cid, which has admirers, including David Thomson, who found it ‘an astonishing departure [for director Anthony Mann] and a total success’, but scarcely supports this hyperbole, suffers from most of the recurring negatives of the genre. It has the usual bombastic score, dialogue that predictably mixes the florid and the commonplace, long, boring battle scenes with the odd inserted close-up to remind us of key cast members (the usual League of Nations round-up), and statuesque compositions involving arches and crenellations, with carefully pos­ed actors but no real sense of drama or poetry. ‘And thus the Cid rode out of the gates of history and into legend’ the solemn voice-over informs us at the end as organ music swells up. As for Charlon Heston as the Cid and Sophia Loren as Chiméne (he with a quiff, she with a coif), it is hard to imagine a pairing less resonant: beautiful in their various ways but with that kind of surface beauty that looks as if thought would disrupt it. Again, the original concept, of the clash of Moorish and Christian cultures in Spain, may have seemed the stuff of epic aspiration, and so may the Cid’s conflict of honour, as Cornelle (unacknowledged as a source here) found in his famous tragedy. Again, the concept is largely defeated by the genre’s confusion of size and significance.

The same sort of criticisms could be ad­duced of The Robe, based on Lloyd Douglass’s best-selling ‘religious’ novel, and the first CinemA­Scope film, directed by Henry Koster, who had made his name directing Deanna Durbin musicals. Such a useful training for the high solemnity of The Robe, which paradoxes what were to become the hallmarks of the genre. There is a truly egregious heavenly chorus at key moments; the film’s accommodation with the production period in matters of hairstyle and dialogue is even more fatuous than usual (‘I want to apologise for last night’, says Richard Burton to Dawn Addams); in those pre-CGI days, the painted backcloth is in evidence; and the turgid voice-over narration attempts to force our attention on to the significance of the material. Again, the idea of Rome coming to terms with a religion spawned in a part of the world under its military occupation is not trivial, but almost everything about its treatment is. It makes one almost grateful for the real ear-
nestness of purpose that led Mel Gibson to put us through such physical excoriations in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

All this is by way of an intertemporal approach to the recent spate of would-be epics, which led me to wonder if the genre, especially in its pseudo-religious, pseudo-historical incarnations, ever had much going for it. Does the genuinely epic require a rigour and complexity of thought which will usually be at odds with the blockbuster goals of these bloated films? In recent months I’ve limited myself to just three — enough to confirm my feelings about the genre, and in the interests of self-preservation. The three I’ve seen are *King Arthur*, *Troy* and *Alexander*. It has to be said that, in their dealings with some of the great stories of the Western cultural heritage, their achievement has been to reduce and vulgarize — and I don’t mean even the sort of hearty vulgarity that might have kept one amused during their inordinate length. Of the three, *Alexander*, the most recent, has more going for it than the other two, which strike me as a little short of inane in their dealings with their great sources.

There is nothing intrinsically stupid in the sort of deconstructive approach taken by director Antoine Fuqua and screenwriter David Franzoni in *King Arthur*. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer for Touchstone Pictures confidently asserted: ‘*King Arthur* is the definitive story of the leader and warrior who emerged to lead the Britons against the Saxons.’ He goes on to insist that Arthur’s period was considerably earlier than is usually accepted and that Arthur, half-Roman, half-British, and his knights (‘The Wild Bunch’, said Franzoni) were the last Roman forces in Britain, charged with one more mission before returning to Rome. It is a point of view, and so is the deliberately unromantic playing down of the chivalric Round Table ideal of the Arthurian legend that we are more familiar with in the works of everyone from Thomas Malory on, through Tennyson and earlier films such as Richard Thorpe’s *Knights of the Round Table* (1952), Joshua Logan’s *Camelot* (1967) or John Boorman’s *Excalibur* (1981). Arguably, there has never been a great film based on the Arthurian legends, though the three I’ve named all have good things going for them; certainly, none has plumbed the depths of *King Arthur*.

The stories of Arthur are part of the English-speaking cultural heritage, linking Christianity with medieval chivalry, the real world of righteous fighting with the magic of Merlin, the purity of true love and virtue with the temptations of lust and the quest for power. Every schoolchild once knew about the finding of the sword Excalibur, the search for the Holy Grail (no, not the Dan Brown version), the knights Galahad, Lancelot and Bedivere, the beauteous Guinevere, the wicked Modred and so on. Probably one can’t take this knowledge for granted any more, and there’s no reason why there shouldn’t be a deconstructed *Arthur* that seeks to account for him and the phenomenon of the Round Table in historical terms, but Fuqua’s film falls on almost every count. It makes no sense as history or drama and simply jettisons the legend in the interests of a foolish, scruffy realism (that is, they all seem like Laurence Olivier compared with the stunning vacuity of Diane Kruger as Helen). I kept thinking of Sir Cedric Hardwicke as Piam in Robert Wise’s 1955 bore, *Helen of Troy*, as he looked at Rosanna Podesta’s Helen and said incredulously: ‘Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?’ Helen may be a silly flighty girl, but that needs to be made a compelling reason for what follows. Mind you, there’s not much even more practised actors could have done with dialogue exchanges like this: Helen says to Paris, ‘You shouldn’t be here.’ Paris: ‘That’s not what you said last night.’ Helen: ‘Last night was a mistake.’ Elsewhere he tells her that he’ll hunt rabbits: ‘We’ll live off the land,’ he says unconvincingly. Their lives, one feels, would be Spartan indeed.

Director Petersen takes one of the greatest stories in Western mythology and makes it the occasion for a display of technology. There are digitally summoned fleets and armies which may initially be breathtaking until two giggling negroes set in: oh, it’s CGI again and so what; and: who are all these people? (At least they were real extras in the days of, say, *El Cid.*). Irrelevant concerns, you might say, but if one were really swept away by the drama they probably wouldn’t surface. Petersen’s direction is banal in the extreme: he keeps things more or less in motion, but resorts to the crudest contrasts for effect; he cuts from ‘intimate scenes’ (e.g., Brad Pitt’s Achilles nudey having his way with vestal virgin Briseis, played by Rose Byrne in one of the film’s better performances) to vast panoramas of massed forces on the move; he can’t control the risible mix of accents and acting styles (those who come off best – Eric Bana, Julie Christie and Peter O’Toole – seem to be working in a vacuum); and he hadn’t

Just as *King Arthur* demystifies the Arthurian legends and their world in which the spiritual and the magical play such influential roles, and offers no compensating textural enrichment, so too does *Troy* do without the gods. Without this dimension, what we are left with is a tiresomely inflated series of action episodes interspersed with ‘personal’ moments of jaw-dropping insipidity. Paris’s abduction of Helen, and how this precipitates a war in which motive is lost as it drags on, founders on totally uninteresting performances.

Orlando Bloom is a pretty, callow Paris, but he seems like Laurence Olivier compared with the stunning vacuity of Diane Kruger as Helen. I kept thinking of Sir Cedric Hardwicke as Piam in Robert Wise’s 1955 bore, *Helen of Troy*, as he looked at Rosanna Podesta’s Helen and said incredulously: ‘Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?’ Helen may be a silly flighty girl, but that needs to be made a compelling reason for what follows. Mind you, there’s not much even more practised actors could have done with dialogue exchanges like this: Helen says to Paris, ‘You shouldn’t be here.’ Paris: ‘That’s not what you said last night.’ Helen: ‘Last night was a mistake.’ Elsewhere he tells her that he’ll hunt rabbits: ‘We’ll live off the land,’ he says unconvincingly. Their lives, one feels, would be Spartan indeed.

**Empire** magazine lists *Troy* as a ‘Big-Budget Disappointment’* because it only made US$133m. Two things shocked me about this: first, that any film has to make more than that to be a success—that is, that any film should cost that sort of obscene money; and, second, that so many people went to see this deplorable film as to get the takings up to even this ‘disappointing’ level.
taste to forbid the hideously sugary song on the soundtrack at the end. 'They'll be talking about this war in a thousand years' time,' someone intones. So they might, but not about this film they won't – not, I predict, in even one year's time.

Critics rarely give these 'epics' an easy ride but nothing seems to stop the public from flocking to them. Some have been singled out for praise for particular elements, as Ben Hur (which won eleven Oscars—not that that proves anything serious) was for its brilliantly filmed chariot race, though much of the rest was a high-minded drag. Nevertheless, their blockbuster status points to filmgoers' insatiable hunger for these long, shapeless examples of creative elephantiasis. There's not the slightest hope that Oliver Stone's Alexander will be the last in the line that threatens, like Macht the others; indeed, in some respects it is flocking to them. Some have been singled though, is the least of them, by Hephaistion's thighs', and Alexander himself talks of 'how men lie together when virtue and knowledge is passed between them'. Stone and his screenwriter are determined to provide a psychoanalytic account of Alexander's bisexuality. It's all pretty much the Golden Books version of Oedipus, but at least there's some move towards — some sense of a need for — a psychology of the hero.

Colin Farrell, unwisely one would think, has publicised his film, and certainly the film's not likely to advance his career. He is too scruffily modern, too suitably commonplace, to deal coherently with so great a figure as Alexander. Bleached blond, he simply hasn't shaken off his image of stubby babbov, of Irishman-on-the-tear in Hollywood, and the scenes between him and Jared Leto's Hephaistion are more or less ludicrous, full of charged oglings and discreet fondlings, as if Stone feels he is being both very daring and very tasteful. At least, though, and simplistic as it is, he does permit his hero to say to his lover: 'I've missed you. I need you. It's you I love Hephaestion, no other.'

As always, what strengths there are in such a film are to be found in the spaciousness of the action, and there are some genuinely magnificent transactions with the varied terrains in which the armies find themselves — Persia, India, Macedonia, etc. As a forest of lances appears over the brow of a hill, there is momentarily generated a sense of awe and threat, but Stone can't resist repeating the effect. When Alexander's horse Bucephalus rears up against a charge of elephants, Alexander is thrown to the ground and the screen is flooded in red in a wonderfully conceived rendering of personal pain and the broader mayhem of war. Not a film without its moments, but moments really aren't enough return for an investment of three hours — and who knows how many millions of dollars.

Virginia Mayo died recently and this melancholy event made me think I'd like to watch Wyler's The Best Years of Our Lives again, all three hours of it. In this case, I didn't begrudge a minute of it: this film has about it a feel of the genuinely epic. Through its study of three ex-servicemen returning to the same American city, Wyler has contrived to make us feel something of the vast significance of a whole nation shaking itself into post-war readjustment. It is about something, something widely important, and treats its subject with seriousness, though not solemnity; it is long without feeling bloated; and it has images that stop the heart with their understanding of human beings in the most intense moments of their lives. None of the films referred to above does anything like this: is this because the screen has so rarely grasped what an epic truly is? Or because, taking on the kinds of subjects they do, they are unable to investigate them with the subtlety and complexity they need if they are to seem more than merely the occasion for conspicuous expenditure? Consider carefully before you next give up three precious hours to one of these big fat duds.


Endnotes
1 Lindsay Anderson's O Lucky Man! (1973) is one of the few remotely mainstream films to have tried this Brechtian approach, and it was not popular.
3 King Arthur production notes, p.11.
4 Ibid.
5 Gabriel Snyder, 'Box-Office Sinners & Winners', Empire, February 2005.
6 Remember One Act Plays of Today? In it John Drinkwater's X=O (1917) in brief poetic vein made this point as the lumbering Troy so signally fails to do.