

**'I AM MASTER OF NOTHING': *IMPERIUM: AUGUSTUS* AND THE STORY OF AUGUSTUS
ON SCREEN**

©Penelope Goodman, University of Leeds

INTRODUCTION

Octavian, later Augustus, appears in our sources as an enigmatic and contradictory figure. On the one hand, he benefits from the flattering attentions of contemporary writers, further reinforced by his own *Res Gestae* and the sympathetic later treatment of Suetonius. On the other, Tacitus *Annals* 1.1-10 depicts him as a manipulative individual, cynically overturning long-held liberties in the pursuit of power, while Cassius Dio openly portrays him as an autocrat (e.g. 53.17): though for Dio this is not an inherent criticism. These sources have provided more than enough fuel for two millennia of conflicting interpretations (Carter 1983; Galinsky 1996: 370-5; Levick 2010: 8-12). While some have been willing to consider Augustus the model of a beneficent monarch (e.g. Petrarch, *Rerum senilium libri* 14.1), others have seen him as a 'subtle tyrant' (e.g. Gibbon 1776 (1994): 96). The twentieth-century experience of dictatorship famously encouraged Syme to view Augustus as a despot whose seemingly propitious regime could never be separated from the crimes and bloodshed on which it rested (1939 [2002]: 1-9). Though subsequent work has added nuance to Syme's perspective, the essentially autocratic nature of Augustus' power means that he is unlikely to find outright favour in contemporary western democracies.

For modern screen audiences, then, his story is likely to appear unpalatable. Reduced to its most basic elements, it is the tale of a man who overthrew a republic and installed himself as an absolute monarch. Yet any telling which aspires towards historical accuracy must acknowledge that this same man also enjoyed widespread contemporary acclaim and died peacefully in his bed. This narrative lacks the complexity offered by the story of Julius Caesar, whose assassination can be read as the tragic fall of a once-great hero, a triumph of liberty over tyranny, or both (Pelling 2006; Wyke 2007: 196-238). Nor can it provide the prurient thrill of drinking in the extravagances of a 'bad' emperor such as Caligula, Nero or Commodus, while simultaneously condemning them as products of a corrupt system and cheering when they, too, get their comeuppance (Winkler 2005a: 106-10; Lindner 2007: 140-89). We should not be surprised to find that Octavian / Augustus' story has been markedly less popular.

A crude measure of relative interest in Octavian / Augustus since the invention of film can be gleaned by counting the portrayals of him identified on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com 1990-2012), and comparing them with his near-contemporaries (fig. 1).¹ This shows that although Octavian / Augustus has appeared on screen reasonably frequently, he falls far behind the late Republican trio of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, and likewise Nero in the imperial period.² The same pattern is equally clear from Lindner's study of films featuring Roman emperors (2007: 112-13). In fact, as we shall see, Octavian / Augustus usually crops up only as a secondary character in other people's stories. Very few deal with him directly, and only one screen portrayal to date has presented the full story of his life. This article presents a brief review of typical approaches to Octavian / Augustus in novels and on screen, before focusing in on the more unusual biopic portrayal offered by the RAI / Lux Vide mini-series, *Imperium: Augustus* (2003). It will ask how this production sought to engage its audience's interest and sympathies with the rather difficult life-story of Octavian / Augustus, and how successfully it did so.

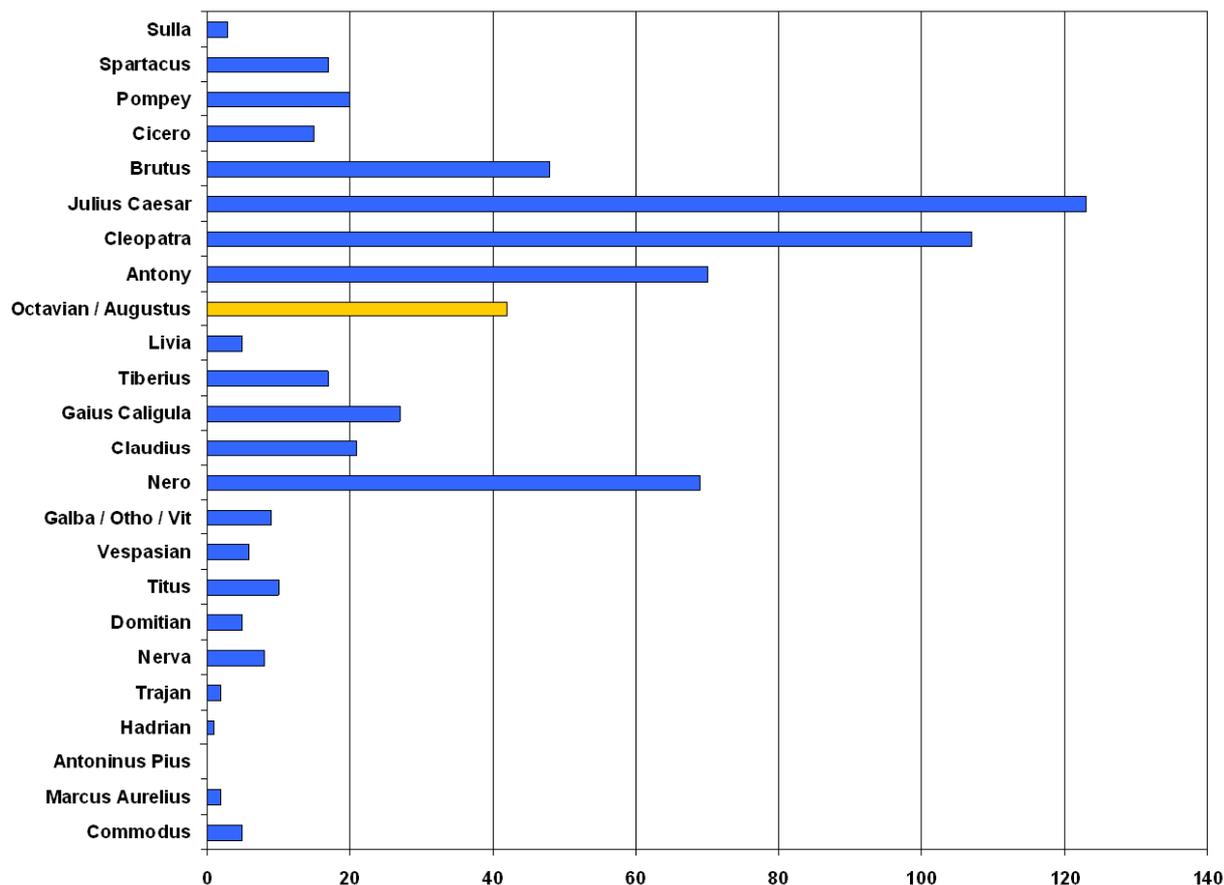


Figure 1. Credited portrayals of Roman historical figures according to the IMDb.

EXISTING NARRATIVE TRADITIONS

The IMDb lists forty-two screen portrayals of Octavian / Augustus in total. Three of these are listed erroneously,³ but I have also been able to identify another nine not included.⁴ We thus have a corpus of at least forty-eight portrayals, of which forty-one are set entirely in the period before 27 BC. As such, they portray not Augustus, but only Octavian, generally casting him as a villainous foil to tragic figures such as Brutus and Cassius or Antony and Cleopatra (Lindner 2007: 114). This tradition, drawing on Plutarch and Shakespeare, is typified by Roddy McDowall in *Cleopatra* (1963). Here, Octavian's cold, ruthless ambition and physical frailty provide a dramatic contrast with Antony and Cleopatra's robust passion and idealism, and his final victory is played not as his triumph, but as their tragedy (Cyrino 2005: 148–9). In all, around thirty-four portrayals follow this basic approach,⁵ and those which do not are usually comedies, ahistorical fantasies or porn pastiches. HBO's *Rome* (2005–7) demonstrates that this take on Octavian remains effective today. Its Octavian is similarly detached, calculating and even sadistic, so that the dying Cleopatra judges him to be a monster with a 'rotten soul'. But while this approach to the character works well in its own right, it would be difficult to reconcile with a portrayal of the same man as the acclaimed emperor Augustus if the narrative were continued.

Indeed, only seven productions portray Augustus as a mature emperor, and most of these do not also deal with his earlier life as Octavian. This means that they can treat Augustus' power as an established fact, without needing to go into how he acquired it. Some are again fantastical, such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* episodes 5.18–20, while historically-grounded portrayals typically focus on brief episodes from his career, and usually ones of regret or failure. Thus the first episode of *The Caesars* (1968) depicts an elderly Augustus coming to terms with the fact that he must accept Tiberius as his heir, while the German film *Hermann*

der Cherusker (1967) and the Spanish *Los cántabros* (1980) both cover defeats visited on Augustus' armies by free peoples on the fringes of the empire. The fullest 20th-century screen portrayal of Augustus was of course Brian Blessed's in *I Claudius* (1976), which covers the whole of the period from 25 BC to AD 14.⁶ But *I Claudius* explicitly positions Augustus as subordinate to Livia. During the banquet scene which introduces the imperial family, and over an image of Augustus gazing placidly from behind Livia's shoulder, Claudius's narrative voice informs us that 'If Augustus ruled the world, Livia ruled Augustus'.⁷ This means that Augustus can be portrayed as likeable enough, and even motivated by moral principles, in keeping with the more positive historical sources (Joshel 2001: 144). But he is essentially a secondary character, blind to Livia's machinations, and himself ultimately a victim of the morality tale about the corrupting nature of autocracy which the series wants to tell (Joshel 2001: 143–4 and 146–7). A few television documentaries have been made about Octavian / Augustus,⁸ but he has received limited interest even in this context. Tellingly, the BBC's recent six-part series, *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (2006), did not include him, despite going well beyond standard territory by including an episode on Tiberius Gracchus.

Many aspects of these screen portrayals also occur in novels. Octavian as villainous foil, for example, appears in the final two instalments of Colleen McCullough's *Masters of Rome* series (1990–2007). As on screen, Augustus tends to be treated separately from Octavian, although the mature emperor does appear more frequently in the context of the novel. Usually, he remains a secondary character in the stories of others, and is portrayed in ways that emphasise his failures, his autocracy, or both. Failed campaigns and / or plots have been popular,⁹ as have the stories of Virgil, Ovid, Julia the Elder and Cleopatra Selene, all of whom allow Augustus to be cast as a cold-hearted manipulator who eventually suffers himself as a result of mistreating them.¹⁰ But in novels an approach not normally used on screen can be found: full treatments of Octavian / Augustus' life in the form of fictionalised biographies. The best known, both simply entitled *Augustus*, are by John Williams (1972) and Alan Massie (1986),¹¹ but others include Günther Birkenfeld's *Leben und Taten des Caesar Augustus* (1935), Olive Gilliam's *The Memoirs of Augustus* (1965) and Roger Caratini's *Auguste* (2007). Following the lead of the ancient sources (e.g. Seneca, *On Clemency* 1.9.1; Julian, *Caesars* 309a–c), most of these novels are explicitly divided into a 'Part I' dealing with the story of Octavian and a 'Part II' dealing with Augustus, thus creating a strong distinction between the triumvir and the mature emperor. They also focus in the second part on events such as illnesses, plots, Julia's exile, the Varus disaster and the problems with the succession, suggesting that Augustus' reign as emperor was overshadowed by personal tragedy. Octavian's successes are thus recast as hollow victories for Augustus, tempering the problematic narrative of the man acclaimed for overthrowing the Republic.

In fact, this emphasis on the personal tragedies of the mature Augustus may also be traced in the ancient sources. It appears first in Pliny the Elder, who recounts a catalogue of Octavian / Augustus' misfortunes in support of his argument that even those usually viewed as archetypes of good fortune also suffer hardships (*Natural History* 7.147–50). Suetonius presents Augustus' good fortune in his family life as failing from the time of Julia's adultery (*Augustus* 65.1), while Tacitus draws an explicit contrast between his public successes and private misfortunes: 'Thus just as Fortune bore up the deified Augustus in public matters, it was less favourable to him at home, on account of the unchastity of his daughter and granddaughter.' (*Annals* 3.24). For the ancient authors, these contrasts appear to have been of interest for the philosophical lesson which they offer about humanity's universal susceptibility to the vicissitudes of fortune. But their observations demonstrate the potential for Augustus' story to be told in terms of a contrast between public success and private tragedy. Though Augustus' violent rise to absolute power may have appeared to bring him happiness and success, the ancient sources offer the opportunity for modern story-tellers to suggest that his happiness was in fact illusory.

IMPERIUM: AUGUSTUS: THE PRODUCTION CONTEXT

The first decade of the 21st century saw a general resurgence of interest in screen portrayals of antiquity. The impact of *Gladiator* is well-attested (Winkler 2005b: xi–xii; Cyrino 2005: 238),

but TV mini-series set in the ancient world were already popular in the mid to late '90s (Solomon 2001: 19–21), and have since flourished in a context characterised by extensive cable and satellite broadcast opportunities and a growing appetite for historical programming of all types (Solomon 2008: 22–6; Dillon 2010: 74–92). On television as in film, treatments of Roman history have predominated. As Nisbet (2008) has argued, Rome offers a combination of familiarity, action and spectacle which Greece finds difficult to match. Certainly, the low budgets and domestic setting of the small screen are better-suited to Roman historical dramas than they are to the epic fantasy stories from Greek mythology now flourishing in the cinema.¹² It is thus unsurprising that TV producers and script-writers seeking to satisfy audience demands for historical programming should come across the story of Octavian / Augustus and wish to capitalise on it. Three major recent portrayals of Octavian and / or Augustus have resulted, in HBO's *Rome* (2005-7), ABC's *Empire* (2005), and RAI's *Imperium: Augustus* (2003). But while the first follows the established 'Octavian as villain' tradition and the second is an ahistorical fantasy story modelled after *Gladiator*, the latter is unique in attempting to bring Octavian / Augustus' complete life story to the screen.

In fact, *Imperium: Augustus* was only the opening instalment of the larger *Imperium* series. This collaborative project has now produced five three-hour mini-series, released under the international titles *Augustus* (2003), *Nero* (2004), *Saint Peter* (2006), *Pompeii* (2007) and *Augustine: The Decline of the Roman Empire* (2009). Led by the Italian production company Lux Vide and state-owned broadcaster RAI, the project has also seen investment from German, Spanish and French producers and broadcasters, employed actors, writers and directors from across Europe and north America, and shot most of its footage on vast purpose-built sets in Tunisia (Lux Vide 2003). Such credentials recall the 'Europudding' tradition (Fisher 1990), but for *Imperium: Augustus*, the casting of major international stars such as Peter O'Toole and Charlotte Rampling, the English-language script and the use of Hollywood screenwriter reveal serious ambitions to capture a mainstream global audience. Publicity material for the opening instalment emphasised the lavish purpose-built sets and the panel of academic experts consulted (Lux Vide 2003: 5-7), thus positioning *Imperium: Augustus* alongside the cinematic epics of the 1960s with their similar claims to both accuracy and spectacle (e.g. Solomon 2001: 69-70). Nonetheless, economies of scale have been achieved within the series, for example by reworking the Tunisian sets. The Rome of the first three instalments became Pompeii for the fourth and Hippo Regius / Milan for the fifth, while the same sets have also been employed on several other productions, including *The Last Legion* (2007) (Empire Studios n.d.). The series thus appears to have been pitched at audiences with some knowledge of ancient history and an appetite for architectural spectacle, but a tolerance for budget constraints.

The guiding vision for the *Imperium* series appears to have altered as it developed. Early press releases stated that *Augustus* and *Nero* were to be followed by treatments of Titus, Marcus Aurelius, Constantine and the fall of the Roman empire (Lux Vide 2003: 24). Scodel and Bettenworth (n.d.) have also shown that marketing materials for *Augustus* in Germany emphasised the globalised, multicultural nature of ancient Rome and its empire, inviting comparisons with the European Union via references to features such as 'common trade and currency'. At this time, then, the aim seems to have been to present a general dramatised history of the Roman empire, which would explore contemporary Europe's cultural and political identity through the medium of its past. But later RAI promotional material placed much greater stress on tracing the emergence of Christianity from within that empire (RAI Fiction n.d.). Emperors were discarded in favour of saints, and publicity for the final instalment on Saint Augustine included a special screening of highlights before the Pope (RAI.tv 2009). These change brought the *Imperium* series more in line with Lux Vide's established reputation as the producers of the earlier *Bible* series, which presented biopics of biblical characters.

Of those instalments in the *Imperium* series not dealing directly with the lives of saints, *Nero* followed in a long tradition of playing its central character off against Christians (Wyke 1997: 110–46; Cyrino 2005: 7–33; Scodel and Bettenworth 2008), although it combined this with an unusual revisionist portrayal of the emperor, who starts out as an idealist and a friend of the Christian characters. *Pompeii*, too, incorporated the theme in classic Bulwer-Lytton fashion by portraying a burgeoning Christian community amidst a decadent society (Wyke 1997: 150–57;

Pomeroy 2007: 32–46; Moormann 2011). The temporal setting of Augustus' story offers less scope for references to Christianity, yet early Christian writers did find ways to appropriate him. Origen (*Contra Celsum* 2.30) and Orosius (*History Against the Pagans* 6.22) depict him as predestined by God to establish the conditions necessary for the coming of the Christ, while John Malalas has him learning from the Delphic oracle of a 'Hebrew child' who will succeed him (*Chronographia* 10.5). Whether or not these texts fed directly into the development of *Imperium: Augustus*, its title character certainly believes that he is fulfilling a destiny laid down by the gods. In a closing voice-over, too, an Augustus now apparently gifted with historical hindsight offers a *Res Gestae*-style summary of his achievements, reporting the size of his empire, the lengths of its roads and aqueducts and the peace which he secured, and concludes with the line: 'In the twenty-third year of my reign, in the province of Judea, Jesus of Nazareth was born.' *Imperium: Augustus* was thus always capable of being read as the first instalment in the story of Christianity's rise from within the Roman empire, even if this was not yet agreed as the guiding vision of the series at the time of its production.

Personal correspondence with the script-writer for *Augustus*, Eric Lerner, has cast some light on creative differences during the development of this production, with particular relevance to the characterisation of Augustus and its relationship with the emergence of Christianity. Lerner, an American screenwriter with Hollywood experience, stated that the original story outline presented to him by Lux Vide focused on Octavian, and ended with his establishment as emperor. This narrative could not have included any reference to the birth of Christ, and nor would it have dealt with the full story of Octavian / Augustus' life. But Lerner in any case found it dramatically unsatisfying, and developed a fuller treatment, based on his own research (pers. comm.). Under Lerner's proposal, the main story would open in 23 BC, and would centre around conversations about the past between Augustus and his biographer Nicolaus of Damascus, while the drama of the succession unfolded around them in the present. Lerner reports that the Lux Vide producers initially received his ideas enthusiastically, but that company founders the Bernabei family were unhappy with his basic vision of Octavian / Augustus as a hero. Reportedly, a senior family member explicitly informed Lerner that the aim of the *Imperium* project was to establish a negative vision of imperial Rome as a back-drop for the emergence of Christianity.

The eventual form of the *Augustus* production supports Lerner's account of conflicting ideas about how Octavian / Augustus' story should be told. Although Lerner was encouraged to write the script he had proposed, the story as filmed dispensed with the character of Nicolaus, and focused instead on Augustus' relationship with his daughter, Julia. This allows considerable emphasis on the mistreatment which she in particular suffers in the name of his ambitions (see further below). Nonetheless, the broadcast version remains far from the critical treatment which the Bernabei family may have desired. Augustus is portrayed throughout as motivated by a genuine belief that he is working to improve the lot of the Roman people, while the references to Christianity are so incidental to the main story that they come across as an afterthought. Ultimately, though different perspectives clearly fed into the production, we must assume that all those involved were keen to create a final product which would be dramatically satisfying for its viewers, and thus profitable. A closer look at the narrative strategies employed will help to reveal how Octavian / Augustus' story can be shaped to these ends.

IMPERIUM: AUGUSTUS: THE NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Key to the dramatic success of *Imperium: Augustus* is its extensive use of flashbacks. Throughout the production, the viewer is carried backwards and forwards between two main parallel strands of narrative, which are themselves book-ended by a third. Short opening and closing scenes take place at Augustus' death-bed, but already by the opening credits the timeframe has shifted to the central, anchoring narrative of the production, which begins in 12 BC with death of Agrippa. This thread presents the conversations between Augustus (Peter O'Toole) and Julia (Vittoria Belvedere) which form the heart of the story. We see Augustus explaining why he wants Julia to marry Tiberius, her arguing against the decision, and its consequences unfolding. But from their conversations, we also repeatedly move back another

level into the past. Here, a parallel thread starting in 46 BC follows the young Octavius / Octavian (Benjamin Sadler) as he is first taken under Julius Caesar's wing, and then sets out to rid Rome of a corrupt aristocracy after his death. These events are evoked by Augustus in the 12 BC narrative to support his essential argument to Julia: that the peace and stability which he fought for as a young man must now be sustained through her marriage.

This structure recalls the readiness of the ancient sources to treat Octavian / Augustus' life as a story of two separate halves: a device also employed in the biographical novels. But the flashbacks offer new possibilities which a simple bipartite structure cannot (Turim 1989; Custen 1992: 182–4). Tackling the two narrative strands in parallel creates variation within the story, renders it manageable within a three-hour timeframe, and emphasises similarities between key scenes from the dramatic present and the past. The flashbacks also play a major role in encouraging sympathy for Octavian / Augustus, in spite of the nature of his rise to power. One way in which they do this is by presenting the results of actions before their causes, thus creating a 'logic of inevitability' (Turim 1989: 17–18). The first five minutes of *Imperium: Augustus* present scenes of Augustus in the Forum which establish that he is affable and approachable, that the people of Rome love him, and that the city is peaceful and prosperous. Before the events of the triumviral period unfold, then, we have already been shown that the reign of Augustus is both inevitable and beneficial, encouraging us to accept the ends as justification for the means. Ronald Syme warned against applying such hindsight to the triumviral era, on the grounds that it prevents fair judgement of people who did not know the future consequences of their actions (1939 [2002]: 4). But in a fictionalised biopic, that very effect can be exploited to cultivate audience sympathy for a controversial character.

Once the story of Octavian's rise to power begins, the flashbacks also ensure that it is presented as a first-person account (Turim 1989: 1–2; Custen 1992: 183). Each individual scene starts with the mature Augustus recalling events from his own past. We then begin to see what he is describing on screen, initially in sepia colouring to signal the transition into the past.¹³ The colours become more vivid, Augustus' voice fades away and we move fully into the scene. But we are never quite allowed to forget that this is his narrative. At key moments, Augustus' voice and / or image fade back in to offer his perspective on what we are seeing: especially for problematic events.¹⁴ Thus while the Octavian of 43 BC pauses to decide whether or not to agree to proscriptions demanded by Antony, the mature Augustus explains how painful he found this decision: an opportunity afforded to no other character in the scene. The horrors and chaos of the proscriptions are then portrayed in a montage, while Augustus bemoans the killings and repeatedly emphasises that they happened at Antony's initiative. At other points in the story, Augustus looks obliquely across such flashback scenes towards an invisible Julia, but for the proscriptions he looks directly into the camera, seemingly addressing his explanations not just to Julia but also to the viewer. The first-person narration thus allows the mature Augustus to set his external actions in the context of his internal feelings, encouraging the viewer to understand and sympathise with him. It is used to similar effect in the novel and screen versions of *I, Claudius*, as well as the fictionalised memoirs of Augustus by Olive Gilliam and Allan Massie.¹⁵ Yet it also makes room for less favourable readings by raising the possibility of unreliable narration. What we are given is Augustus' personal understanding of his past, viewed with hindsight and potentially distorted by ego and memory.

Meanwhile, the audience's sympathies are also solicited by suggesting that the young Octavian had creditable motivations even for his more questionable actions. That is, in addition to casting a flattering light over Octavian's career by viewing it in hindsight, *Imperium: Augustus* also sets out to show that he can be judged favourably in the context of his own time. This is achieved primarily through a number of early scenes involving Julius Caesar, who is portrayed unproblematically as a moral hero, working for a better Rome. Caesar's heroism is established at Munda, where we first encounter him digging ditches alongside his men, and then see him explaining to the young Octavius that he is fighting for 'Peace. Safety. Honest courts. Government for all.' Shortly afterwards, he demonstrates these principles directly, first by showing clemency to Sextus Pompeius, and then by intervening in a court case to defend a farmer against Cassius Longinus, who has fraudulently taken his land. This case in particular establishes Caesar as a friend of the ordinary people, setting out to protect

the vulnerable from exploitation by a corrupt and greedy aristocracy. This is arguably a rather distorted interpretation of the historical Caesar, but if taken at face value it should hold considerable appeal for western democratic audiences. Certainly, Lerner reported that it was his discovery, via Syme, that the Roman Republic had been a corrupt oligarchy rather than a modern-style democracy as he had previously believed which inspired him to view Caesar as a hero for overturning it (pers. comm.).

Once Caesar's good intentions have been established, we then see Octavius subscribing to his vision for the future. Over goblets of wine, Caesar explicitly asks for Octavius' life in service to Rome, and Octavius willingly agrees. From this point onwards we are meant to understand that Octavius genuinely believes in Caesar's vision, and considers it his destiny to fulfil it after Caesar's assassination. 'Destiny' is regularly evoked in biopics to explain the exceptional drive of the central character (Bingham 2010: 35–7). Indeed, it is employed in the biographical novel by Allan Massie, where on the night before Antony's arrival at Brundisium, a conversation with a soldier bearing the lucky name of Septimus convinces Octavian that he is 'a man of destiny' (Massie 1995 [1986]: 124–5, ch. 1.7). Combined with the portrayal of Caesar as champion of the people in *Imperium: Augustus*, it supplies an acceptable motivation for Octavian's willingness to engage in proscriptions and civil war: he believes that they will ultimately help to improve the lot of the ordinary Romans. It also smoothes over the disjunction between the viewer's hindsight and the perspective of the character, who cannot know his own future. The concept of destiny helps to suggest that Octavian *does* have some sense of what lies ahead, strengthening the feeling of inevitability about his rise to power.

Again, though, *Imperium: Augustus* also offers scope for a more critical interpretation of Octavian's belief in his destiny. Julia in particular frequently pours scorn on the very idea. When Augustus first asks her to marry Tiberius, knowing that she does not love him, she articulates the inhumanity of this request by asking whether she has ever been anything other than an instrument to fulfil his 'destiny'. Later, too, she explicitly questions his real motivations: 'It's convenient, isn't it, to be chosen by the gods? You can move lives around without fault – because you are chosen. And the mission comes first, no matter who you have to destroy.' This is tantamount to saying that Augustus' belief in his destiny is nothing more than an excuse to mask his own ambitions. The presence of these internal criticisms within the script helps to accommodate divergent views on the part of the audience. Whether individual viewers are prepared to subscribe to the idea that Octavian was genuinely motivated by a sense of moral destiny or not, they will find characters within the story whose views reflect their own.

Meanwhile, even if Octavian's motivations can be established as honourable and their results beneficial, his autocratic power as Augustus is still likely to strike most western viewers as distasteful. This does not necessarily mean that they cannot enjoy a biographical screenplay about him. While the biopics of the Hollywood studio era were usually celebratory (Custen 1992; Bingham 2010: 31–40), the genre today is far more complex. Recent examples such as *Nixon* (1995), *Downfall* (2004) and *The Iron Lady* (2011) have met with box-office and critical success by adopting an investigatory mode, looking for the human behind a controversial public figure and highlighting the (often tragic) disjunction between external views of their subject and his or her internal perspective (Bingham 2010: 100–122). As Bingham shows, the appeals of this approach for contemporary audiences lie in the deconstruction of powerful figures and the exposure of the damaging effects which their personal illusions can have on countless others around them. But *Nixon*, *Downfall* and *The Iron Lady* all place considerable emphasis on moments of public demise or disgrace, depicting their subjects at the point when they came face to face with society's negative verdict. For Augustus, this is rendered historically impossible by his secure hold on power and his peaceful death. Nonetheless, a contrast can be drawn between the public and the private Augustus, exploring his human side and suggesting that his external success masked personal tragedy.

In *Imperium: Augustus*, it is here that emperor's relationship with his daughter becomes most important. During their conversations, Augustus asks Julia to make the same sacrifice he made as a young man: to put her duty to Rome before her own happiness, and marry Tiberius in order to ensure a stable succession to Gaius and Lucius.¹⁶ But Julia loves Lullus

Antoni, the son of Mark Antony. Where the young Octavius gladly devoted his life to the betterment of Rome, Julia's priorities are different, and she protests that if she marries Tiberius, her own life will be lost. The two characters thus encapsulate opposite sides in the classic debate between public duty and private happiness, and as already shown, their conflict provides a context in which Julia can criticise Augustus' choice. But ultimately the result is tragic for both. The final half-hour of *Imperium: Augustus* focuses exclusively on Julia's disastrous marriage to Tiberius, her deteriorating relationship with Augustus, and her eventual complicity in Lullus' attempt to assassinate him. The story climaxes with two painful scenes in quick succession. First, Augustus summons Julia to his study to be ordered into exile, where she screams that he is a monster and a tyrant and is dragged away leaving him alone and in tears.¹⁷ Straight afterwards we see the funeral of Gaius in AD 4, which represents the final failure of Augustus' plans for the succession.

This is the collapse of Augustus' private fortunes articulated in the ancient sources and capitalised on in the biographical novels. But while Pliny, Suetonius and Tacitus used the motif to demonstrate the fickleness of fortune and imperfection of the human condition, *Imperium: Augustus* explicitly portrays its central character as responsible for his own misery. We have seen him dismiss Julia's pleas not to be subjected to a loveless marriage, and insist on putting his public duty over her happiness. For Julia, the consequences are grave, including a revenge rape committed by Tiberius when he discovers her ongoing adultery with Lullus. Thus, while Augustus' grief over Julia's exile is obviously very genuine, he bears culpability for it, and his suffering may be read as a just punishment for his mistreatment of her. This hardly whitewashes his character, especially after his cruel treatment of both Julia and Octavia has been clearly depicted on screen. But it casts Augustus' story as a classic tragedy, in which – in his private life at least – he brings about his own fall from happiness through flawed and misguided actions. Whether or not we like him, this does make for compelling drama. It is possible to sympathise with this Augustus, in the same way as we might with Oedipus or Othello, even while condemning some of his actions.

The impact of the tragedy is further heightened at Gaius' funeral, where Augustus arrives at a dreadful epiphany. Where *I Claudius* followed Tacitus in blaming Livia for Gaius and Lucius' deaths (*Annals* 1.3), *Imperium: Augustus* is careful to establish her innocence. Yet the alternative, grimly stated by Augustus, is far worse: 'Fever took them both. The gods wanted it that way.' Faced with this divinely-sanctioned blow to his plans for the succession, Augustus is forced to conclude that his belief in his own destiny was an illusion all along. As he tells Livia, 'I can control nothing. I am master of nothing. Not my life, not my death. I am in the hands of the gods like any mortal. And if the gods have sent someone to save the world, I am not that one.' Taking Livia by the hand, he ponders how happy they might have been if she had taught him this long ago. Augustus' faith in his original decision to put duty before happiness is thus deconstructed, leaving him with no justification after all for the cruel actions which it has led him to commit.

Imperium: Augustus then closes as it opened: with two 'book-end' scenes that build on Suetonius' famous description of Augustus' death-bed (*Augustus* 99.1). In the opening scene, Augustus asks his assembled family not merely whether he has played his part well in the comedy of life, but more specifically whether he was 'just, or cruel'. In its closing counterpart, his famous question is addressed directly into the camera: and thus to the watching audience. These scenes directly invite the viewer to pass judgement on Octavian / Augustus, as he has been portrayed in the production. In doing so, they suggest that arriving at a personal view of the central character is all part of the pleasure of watching the mini-series. Certainly, the story as filmed is capable of supporting either a sympathetic or a critical perspective. The contradictory first emperor persists, even in a narrative which has worked hard to humanise him.

CONCLUSION

Imperium: Augustus builds on ideas which had already been developed in biographical novels about Octavian / Augustus: for example, contrasting public success with private misfortune, or

casting Augustus as a tragic figure. These approaches help to mitigate the problems which have made Octavian / Augustus relatively unattractive to western story-tellers. They provide reasons to sympathise with the character, suggest that his wealth and power became a poisoned chalice, and indeed complicate the rather dull stability of his reign as emperor. But bringing Octavian / Augustus' story to the screen for the first time opened up new possibilities. In particular, the use of flashbacks allows *Imperium: Augustus* to explore Octavian / Augustus' internal perspective, suggest creditable motivations for his actions, and ultimately critique him by deconstructing his own belief in the notion of 'destiny'. These devices encourage the audience to understand his perspective and view him as a human character, while retaining the potential to accommodate different judgements of Octavian / Augustus as a political figure.

In practice, though, the production was only a moderate success. In Italy, it achieved a 26.5% audience share over the two nights of its premiere broadcast on RAI Uno (Lux Vide 1999-2008), comfortably above the channel's annual average at that time of around 22-23% (Auditel n.d.). But most major newspapers appear not to have reviewed it,¹⁸ while the Vatican-based *L'Osservatore Romano* slated it for artistic poverty and historical over-simplification (*Corriere della Sera* 2003). It was also broadcast in Germany, Hungary, Spain and Poland, and was popular enough in Germany to be novelised by the Catholic-owned publication company, Weltbild.¹⁹ But in the UK, the USA and Australia it was released directly to DVD, and to the best of my knowledge has never been broadcast on television.²⁰ Though a success in predominantly Roman Catholic continental Europe, then, *Imperium: Augustus* failed to attract the international audiences towards which it aspired.

In the end, this may have little to do with the depiction of Octavian / Augustus. Lux Vide's reputation as a producer of biblical biopics and established distribution network may be enough to explain the different treatment in Anglophone countries. Reviewers on international film and DVD websites have also tended to comment unfavourably on the limited budget and use of dubbing, but say nothing about whether they found the characterisation of Octavian / Augustus effective or convincing (Debes 2004; Plath 2004; Hattaway 2005; Hoedemaekers n.d.). Nonetheless, the limited success of *Imperium: Augustus* makes it unlikely that producers will rush to dramatise his life story on screen again in the near future. Perhaps other approaches might be more successful. Certainly, Augustus' political career offers ample opportunity for exploring modern concerns such as the crafting of political personas or the relationship between security and civil liberties, and these might be better explored in the medium of the documentary. We can surely expect some of these to appear in connection with the bimillennium of his death on 19th August 2014.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Joanna Paul and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones for the opportunity to present this paper at the *Cinema and Antiquity: 2000-2011* conference in Liverpool, and my fellow delegates for helpful comments and suggestions. I am grateful to Helen Finch and Charlotte Trémouilhe for feedback on an early written draft, and to Trevor Fear and my two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions in advance of publication.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auditel, n.d. *Emittenti Satelitari / nazionali - Archivio rapporti mesi*, http://www.auditel.it/flash_dati_archivio.htm. Accessed July 2012.

Baxter, J. 1971. *The Cinema of Josef von Sternberg*. London and New York: Barnes.

Bingham, D. 2010. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The biopic as contemporary film genre*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Carter, J. 1983. Augustus down the centuries. *History Today*, 33/3: 24-30.

- Corriere della Sera* 2003. L' «Osservatore romano» stronca la fiction «Augusto». *Corriere della Sera Archivio Storico*, http://archivistorico.corriere.it/2003/dicembre/05/Osservatore_romano_stronca_fiction_Augusto_co_0_031205072.shtml. Accessed January 2012.
- Custen, G. 1992. *Bio/Pics: how Hollywood constructed public history*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Cyrino, M. 2005. *Big Screen Rome*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Cyrino, M. 2008 (ed.). *Rome Season One: history makes television*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Debes, C. 2004. Augustus (Augustus). *Powermetal.de*, <http://powermetal.de/video/review-77.html>. Accessed July 2011.
- Dillon, R. 2010. *History on British television: constructing nation, nationality and collective memory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Elsner, J. and J. Masters 1994 (eds.). *Reflections of Nero: culture, history, and representation*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Empire Studios n.d. *Empire Studios*, <http://www.empirestudios.biz/>. Accessed January 2012.
- Fisher, W. 1990. Let Them Eat Europudding. *Sight And Sound*, 59/4: 224-27.
- Galinsky, K. 1996. *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gibbon, E. 1776 (1994). *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I. London: Penguin.
- Graves, R. 1986 (1934). *I, Claudius and Claudius the God*. London: Penguin.
- Hales, S. and J. Paul 2011. *Pompeii in the Public Imagination from its Rediscovery to Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hattaway, M. 2005. Augustus. *DVD Verdict*, <http://www.dvdverdict.com/reviews/augustus.php>. Accessed July 2011.
- Hoedemaekers, J. n.d. Imperium: Augustus. *Movie2Movie.nl*, <http://www.movie2movie.nl/r102952-Recensie-Imperium-Augustus.html>. Accessed July 2011.
- IMDb.com 1990-2012. *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/>. Accessed July 2011-January 2012.
- Joshel, S. 2001. *I, Claudius*: Projection and Imperial Soap Opera. In Joshel, Malamud and McGuire 2001: 119-161.
- Joshel, S., M. Malamud and D. T. McGuire 2001 (eds.). *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lerner, E. pers. comm. Email correspondence, June-July 2011.
- Levick, B. 2010. *Augustus: Image and Substance*. Harlow: Longman.
- Lindner, M. 2007. *Rom und seine Kaiser im Historienfilm*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Antike.
- Lux Vide 1999-2008. *Lux Vide*, <http://www.luxvide.it/index.php>. Accessed January 2012.
- Lux Vide 2003. RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana presenta una coproduzione RAI Fiction–Lux Vide: *Augusto, il primo imperatore*. Press release accessible at <http://www.luxvide.it/upload/pdf/77.doc>. Accessed January 2012.
- Massie, A. 1995 (1986). *Augustus*. Chatham: Sceptre.
- Moormann, E. 2011. Christians and Jews at Pompeii in late nineteenth-century fiction. In Hales and Paul 2011: 171-84.
- Nisbet, G. 2008. *Ancient Greece in Film and Popular Culture*. Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press.
- Pelling, C. 2006. Judging Julius Caesar. In Wyke 2006: 3-26.

- Plath, J. 2004. Imperium: Augustus – DVD review. *Movie Metropolis*, <http://www.dvdtown.com/review/augustus/14901/2585/>. Accessed July 2011.
- Pomeroy, A. 2007. *Then it was Destroyed by the Volcano: the ancient world in film and on television*. London: Duckworth.
- RAI Fiction n.d. Progetto Imperium. *RAI Fiction* <http://www.raifiction.rai.it/raifictionarticolo/0,,5261,00.html>. Accessed July 2011 (no longer available).
- RAI.tv 2009. L'anteprima a Castelgandolfo. *RAI TV*, <http://www.rai.tv/dl/RaiTV/programmi/media/ContentItem-3761833f-09dc-471b-9097-1eb3f9e1f9fa.html>. Accessed January 2012.
- Scodel, R. and A. Bettenworth n.d. Roger Young's movie "Augustus" and the European Union. *Scodel and Bettenworth Roman Movie Page*, <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/roman.movies/files/augustusheaderpdf.pdf>. Accessed January 2012.
- Scodel, R. and A. Bettenworth 2008. *Whither Quo Vadis?: Sienkiewicz's novel in film and television*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Solomon, J. 2001. *The Ancient World in the Cinema*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Solomon, J. 2008. Televising antiquity: from *You Are There* to *Rome*. In Cyrino 2008: 11-28.
- Syme, R. 1939 (2002). *The Roman Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Turim, M. 1989. *Flashbacks in Film: memory and history*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Williams, J. 1973 (1972). *Augustus*. London: Penguin.
- Winkler, M. 2005a. *Gladiator* and the Colosseum: ambiguities of spectacle. In Winkler 2005b: 87-110.
- Winkler, M. 2005b (ed.). *Gladiator: film and history*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Wyke, M. 1997. *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, cinema and history*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wyke, M. 2006 (ed.). *Julius Caesar in Western Culture*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Wyke, M. 2007. *Caesar: a life in western culture*. London: Granta.

¹ Figures taken in January 2012. Identifications are submitted by individual users, so that well-known characters in widely-available productions are most likely to be registered. The peaks and troughs of the graph are thus probably somewhat exaggerated.

² Screen portrayals of both Caesar and Nero of course build on a rich history of older story traditions (Elsner and Masters 1994, Wyke 1997: 110–46, Wyke 2006, Wyke 2007 and Scodel and Bettenworth 2008).

³ Octavian / Augustus does not actually appear in *I Claudius* (1937), *Caligula* (1975) or *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*, 'Revolution' (2006).

⁴ *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (1913), *La vida íntima de Marco Antonio y Cleopatra* (1947), *Erode il grande* (1959), *Le legioni di Cleopatra* (1960), *Antonius und Cleopatra* (1963), *Hermann der Cherusker* (1967), *Kureopatura* (1970), *Antonio e Cleopatra* (1996), *Private Cleopatra I* (2003).

⁵ Of the thirty-four, twenty-one are versions of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. The remaining thirteen deal with the triumviral period, all but two focusing primarily on Cleopatra.

⁶ The uncompleted film *I, Claudius* (1937) instead omitted Augustus, starting with his deification (Baxter 1971: 136–7).

⁷ Cf. Graves' novel: 'Augustus ruled the world, but Livia ruled Augustus' (1986 [1934]: 24, ch. 2).

⁸ E.g. *Augustus: First of the Emperors* (1997) or *Caesar Augustus: Der erste römische Kaiser* (2007).

⁹ E.g. Robert Hamilton, Lord Belhaven (1951), *The Eagle and the Sun*; Ralph Graves (1955), *The Lost Eagles*; Wallace Breem (1974), *The Legate's Daughter*.

¹⁰ Virgil: Herman Broch (1945), *The Death of Virgil*; David Wishart (1995), *I, Virgil*. Ovid: David Malouf (1978), *An Imaginary Life*; Christoph Ransmayr (1991) *The Last World*. Julia: Elizabeth Dored (1963), *I Loved Tiberius*; Edward Burton (1999), *Caesar's Daughter*. Cleopatra Selene: Michelle Moran (2009), *Cleopatra's Daughter*; Stephanie Dray (2011), *Lily of the Nile*; Vicky Alvear Shecter (2011), *Cleopatra's Moon*.

¹¹ Massie's book is sometimes titled *Let The Emperor Speak*.

¹² E.g. *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010), *Immortals* (2011).

¹³ A common technique (Turim 1989: 16), though here somewhat anachronistic.

¹⁴ Voice-overs and double-exposures are long-standing staples of both flashback sequences and biopic narratives (Turim 1989: 110; Bingham 2010: 114).

¹⁵ Eric Lerner confirmed that he had read Massie's novel (pers. comm.).

¹⁶ These requests are presented in similar terms to an equivalent scene in Williams' *Augustus* (ch. II.5.1). Lerner confirmed that he had read and admired this novel (pers. comm.).

¹⁷ Again, this bears close comparison with Williams' *Augustus* (ch. II.6.6).

¹⁸ Archives checked: *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa*, *Il Messaggero*.

¹⁹ Victor Simon (2004), *Augustus: historischer Roman*. Augsburg: Weltbild. Lindner (2007: 94).

²⁰ Email enquiries to RAI and Lux Vide asking for details of international broadcasts of *Imperium: Augustus* have met with no response.