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ERIK THE CONQUEROR

Gli invasori
1961

CREW

Directed by **Mario Bava**
Produced by **Ferruccio De Martino**
Executive Producer **Lionello Santi**
Story and Screenplay by **Oreste Biancoli, Piero Pierotti** and **Mario Bava**
Director of Photography **Mario Bava**
Edited by **Mario Serandrei**
Music by **Roberto Nicolosi**
Set Designer **Giorgio Giovannini**
Costume Designer **Tina Loriedo-Grani**

CAST

Cameron Mitchell as Eron
Alice Kessler as Rama
Ellen Kessler as Daya
George Ardisson as Erik, Duke of Helford
Andrea Cecchi as Sir Rutford
Jacques Delbò as Olaf
Franco Giacobini as Rustichello
Raffaele Baldassarre as Blak
Enzo Doria as Bennet
Gianni Solaro as Ranco
Franco Ressel as King Lotar
Livia Contardi as Hadda
Folco Lulli as Harald, King of the Vikings
Françoise Cristophe as Queen Alice



SWORDS AND SENSATIONALISM:

Mario Bava's grand-spectacle of blood, violence and sadism in *Erik the Conqueror* and the Italian *peplum* film

by Kat Ellinger

There is no denying Mario Bava was an innovator when it came to Italian genre film. The fact that he worked on very strict budgets, often on impossibly tight shooting schedules, while juggling international cast and crews, many of whom spoke little or no Italian, makes the magic he conjured onscreen even more miraculous. A true master of his craft, there was no one quite like Mario Bava. And although Bava isn't a name overly associated with the *peplum* (sword-and-sandal) genre – historical fantasy epics, usually set in Ancient Rome or Greece, although not limited to these places or era; sometimes with, or without, mythological elements – his presence is nevertheless felt within its core. As Peter Bondanella asserts, while there were roughly 150-200 *pepla* made in the cycle's peak years (1957-1965), a handful stand out. Bondanella lists six in particular: *Hercules* (*Le fatiche di Ercole*, 1958), *Hercules Unchained* (*Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, 1959), *Hercules and the Captive Women* (*Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide*, 1961), *Hercules in the Haunted World* (*Ercole al centro della terra*, 1961), *Samson and the Seven Miracles of the World* (*Maciste alla corte del Gran Khan*, 1961) and *The Witch's Curse* (*Maciste all'inferno*, 1962).¹ Mario Bava was associated with three of these films, providing lighting, camerawork and special effects on *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained*, and directing *Hercules in the Haunted World*. Bava's work on *Hercules* and *Hercules Unchained* is particularly relevant, given that these two films, and their international success, have been credited as starting off the cycle, making Bava a key figure working within the genre from its inception. His association with the *peplum* continued in his own films *Erik the Conqueror* (*Gli Invasori*, 1961) and *Knives of the Avenger* (*I coltelli del vendicatore*, 1966), and he also provided special effects in the field for other directors, even venturing outside the medium of cinema for the epic television adaptation of Homer's *The Odyssey* (*L'Odissea*, 1968) for director Franco Rossi, with Bava also taking some directorial duties on the series alongside Rossi and Piero Schivazappa (*Femina ridens*, 1969). Much like horror, the *peplum* is a genre of fantasy and spectacle, and Bava was a master of both. As an effects wizard and a director who revelled in creating a sense of spectacle in everything he did, the *peplum*, with its tales of mythology, monsters, and bloody violence, provided the perfect vehicle for Bava's particular skillset.

¹ - Bondanella, Peter (2011) *A History of Italian Cinema*, p.166. Continuum.



Although the *peplum* rose to prominence in the late 50s/early 60s, its roots lie much further back, to Italy's Golden Age, and films like *Cabiria* (1914) – inspired by early Roman writing from Titus Livius – with its sense of grand-spectacle, notions of pagan sacrifice, imposing landscapes and operatic drama. One of *Cabiria's* main characters, the slave/strongman Maciste, went on to be resurrected in around 25 contemporary sword-and-sandal epics. Even though modern *pepla* were in part propelled by Hollywood blockbusters – a fact which is relevant to *Erik the Conqueror*, given that it was inspired by United Artists' *The Vikings* (1958), starring the likes of Tony Curtis, Kirk Douglas and Janet Leigh – their tradition lies in the history of Roman and Italian art and culture, as well as early national cinema. As Moine argues, the *peplum*, “because of its ‘ancient’ subject matter which partly attaches it to a national past, and longstanding existence in Italian cinema of grand-spectacle films on Roman subjects, and recurrent heroes like Maciste (created by Cabiria, Pastrone, 1914), it has an Italian continuity. But in the 1950s it is more accurate to say that this genre returns to Italian cinema via the epics of Hollywood cinema, which were themselves earlier influenced (around 1915) by the grandiose settings and elaborate camera movements of Italian films.”²

Mario Bava's connection to classic Italian cinema runs deep. From the day he was born the camera was in his blood. His father, Eugenio Bava, was an innovator in early camera technique and special effects, lending his talents – and drawing on his background as an artist and sculptor – to the original *Cabiria*, as well as several other early Italian features. It was during the production of *Cabiria* that Eugenio was able to experiment with groundbreaking effects work such as the eruption of Mount Etna, which, as Tim Lucas points out, “looks remarkably like certain effects shots in Mario Bava's *Terrore nello spazio/Planet of the Vampires* (1965, on which Eugenio also worked).”³ In many ways Mario had more in common with his father's generation – filmmakers who were adept at complex camera trickery and used it as an artform, like Georges Méliès for example – than he did with many of his contemporaries. If we take this factor into account, and couple it with his proclivity for dark subject matter, atmosphere and visuals, it is perhaps not surprising that Mario Bava's *pepla* stand out as different to many of the other industry standard efforts which saturated the market throughout the genre's golden years. *Erik the Conqueror* was no exception to this. While it owes some debt to its Hollywood predecessor, under the meticulous hand of Bava the silver screen fjords of Norway and jolly swashbuckling action tone of the original are replaced by darkness, sadism and bloody violence. For the director, the *peplum* became as grotesque and sensational as the Gothic horror films he made. As Tim Lucas asserts, “Bava's films reflect a preoccupation with fear, superstition and death so pervasive that it spills over even into unlikely terrain of his science fiction, western and mythological films.”⁴

2 - Moine, Raphaëlle (2009) *Cinema Genre*, p.196. Wiley-Blackwell.

3 - Lucas, Tim (2007) *Mario Bava: All the Colors of the Dark*, p.44. Video Watchdog.

4 - *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Bava was not the only director who saw the potential for extracting horror from the *peplum*. For example, as Peter Bondanella argues (in reference to the foundations of the much later Italian zombie and cannibal cycles), “interest in zombies and cannibals actually has something of a history in Italian cinema. One unusual *peplum* epic by Giuseppe Vari (1916-93) – *War of the Zombies (Roma Contra Roma, 1964)* – has Roman legionnaires engaged in mortal combat with undead Roman soldiers.”⁵ While Roberto Curti states,

The *peplum* displayed an enthusiastic easiness with staging monsters and figures pertaining to a horror related imagery: examples are the flying zombies set off by Licos in *Hercules in the Haunted World* (1961), the faceless army under the command of Kormak the vampire (Jacquesernas) in *Goliath and the Vampires*, the creatures designed by Carlo Rambaldi for *Medusa Against the Son of Hercules (Perseo l'invincibile, 1963, Alberto De Martino)* and the legions of the undead of *Rome Against Rome*. [...] Even the themes and the characters of the Gothic would show up over and over again in the sword and sandal genre, with minor changes...⁶

Curti also points to the similarities between Riccardo Freda's *peplum The Witch's Curse* and Mario Bava's Gothic *Black Sunday (La maschera del demonio, 1960)* to highlight his argument. Freda's 1963 feature not only took inspiration from the forerunning Italian Gothic, but was also a remake of a much earlier film: *Maciste in Hell (Maciste all'Inferno, 1925)*, where *peplum* favourite Maciste finds himself transported to a 19th century setting to be tempted by a series of female demons, in a tale based on Dante's *Inferno*. A far cry from Freda's later adaption, the work was inspired by depictions of Hell portrayed in illustrations of French artist Gustave Doré and revels in dark grand-spectacle and operatic drama: a highlight of the film is a swarm of flying demons, whipped up in a frenzy as they circle the pits of hell beneath them. As Tim Lucas suggests, “Eugenio Bava was likely to have contributed to the film's hallucinatory imagery,⁷ and it is this exact same hallucinatory quality, and exquisite sense of darkness, with which Mario Bava would craft many of his key films, taking the classic mode his father helped to build, and exploding it into nightmarish Technicolor visions of the horrific and otherworldly for modern audiences.

While *Erik the Conqueror* lacks the mythological aspects of many other *peplum* films in the cycle, under Mario Bava's direction it has a lot more in common with his horror films than one would assume from glancing at the synopsis. The film hits the ground running in an extended battle scene which leaves little to the imagination. A mother and child

5 - Bondanella, Peter (2011) *A History of Italian Cinema*, p.327. Continuum.

6 - Curti, Roberto (2015) *Italian Gothic Horror Films: 1957–1969*, p.16. Macfarland.

7 - Lucas, Tim (2007) *Mario Bava: All the Colors of the Dark*, p.60. Video Watchdog.



are impaled on a spear during combat. People are stabbed and maimed. The sea turns red with blood, as the central characters, Viking brothers Erik (George Ardisson) and Eron (Cameron Mitchell), are separated in the fracas and young Erik is left in an ocean full of floating dead bodies as he cries for his lost sibling. Bava leaves little room to breathe before fast-forwarding to a show-stopping centrepiece where a young couple is strung up for crucifixion in a Viking ritual. The sadistic imagery evoked by the bodies is laden with a sexual subtext, both in the sweat and blood glistening on abused flesh, and the way in which the figures are spread out, prone and vulnerable, bound by ropes. Bava adds further provocative elements with a group of seductive young women engaged in ritual dance as the helpless victims look on. The women sway rhythmically, brandishing phallic daggers as part of the dance, and the scene swells with a sense of primal libidinal energy. He then repeats aspects of bondage on two further occasions: when Erik is captured and strung up on a cross to await his execution and when Daya (Ellen Kessler), Eron's mistress, is taken as hostage by the evil Sir Rutford (Andrea Checchi).

This is not to say that the original *The Vikings* was not without its subversive elements, especially in the use of coded language to allude to rape as part of Viking culture. However, Bava is not content to shy away from depicting sadism on screen, a fact which is clearly evident in some of the aforementioned set pieces. The scenes featuring Lord Rutford and Daya form an excellent case in point. The victim, clad in a red dress which has been torn apart and leaves little room for modesty, her hands shackled by metal cuffs and chains, would not be out of place in one of Bava's horror features. He uses his trademark otherworldly lighting, pulsating in a contrast of red and green, to evoke a fantastical, almost supernatural ambience, a feature which crops up in all of the 'horrific' scenes throughout the film, apart from the initial carnage on the beach which is set in daylight – instead the director lights the sky in hues of bloody red in the aftermath of the violence. Bava continues to push the bar as the film reaches its bloody denouement, by having Daya tortured by Lord Rutford. Still chained up, she is then forced to endure a hideous contraption which threatens to unleash a deadly spider when a sand timer empties out, as the kidnapper declares: "All you need is a bite to die in atrocious pangs, and it will feel like a liberation." The lights continue to pulse as tribal drums beat on in the background, and Rutford does nothing to hide his glee at the prospect of killing the girl slowly, after watching her suffer.

Aspects of sadism were never far from view when it came to Bava's horror. From *Black Sunday*, shot the year before *Erik the Conqueror*, he revelled in the darker aspects the genre had to offer. One of the most memorable scenes in *Black Sunday* is the opening, where the witch Asa Vajda (Barbara Steele) is not only burnt to death, but has a mask hammered to her face beforehand. *Blood and Black Lace* (*Sei donne per l'assassino*, 1964) and its sadistic murders – for example, one woman is burnt to death on a hot lamp, another

is strangled and then drowned – would set a similar tone for the entire Italian *giallo* cycle to come. 1963's *The Whip and the Body* (*La frusta e il corpo*, 1963) pivoted entirely on a sadomasochistic relationship between its main protagonists, causing outrage for American censors who stripped the film of all its Sadean context before allowing it to be shown. And continuing on with the *peplum*, Bava used the techniques he first experimented with in *Erik the Conqueror*, but brought in a full-blown mythological backdrop, to make one of the most perfect examples of a Gothic hybrid: *Hercules in the Haunted World*. There, Christopher Lee plays King Lico, necromancer and King of the Underworld, who has at his disposal a legion of undead to do his evil bidding. In order to rescue his maiden, Hercules has to travel to the very bowels of Hades itself. In the later *Knives of the Avenger* – where Bava stepped in late in the production and, after a rewrite, had only six days to shoot – although the lighting and other technical aspects which summon his usual grand-spectacle atmosphere are absent, there are still touches of horror here and there, like elements of witchcraft, and a scene in which a gang of marauding pillagers interrupt a wedding and throw down a pair (of admittedly ropey-looking) decapitated heads as a present to the happy couple. There is also the lead up to a rape played out in flashback form, where a woman is cornered and tormented by a masked man.

If we consider the director's main themes, and recurring style statements, *Erik the Conqueror* becomes an important part of Mario Bava's catalogue of dark and sadistic work. Its brilliance lies in the way he subverts the Hollywood swashbuckling action film and turns it into something far more horrific. For this, it belongs head and shoulders alongside some of the director's major works. It is a film which deserves to be celebrated much more than it has been, for the way in which it revels in the darker aspects of human nature, and as a shining example of Italian grand-spectacle cinema, made only the way Mario Bava could.

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ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Erik The Conqueror (Gli invasori) has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with Italian and English mono audio.

All restoration work was carried out at L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna. The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan and was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, picture instability and other instances of film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques.

The mono Italian language track was remastered from the optical sound track negatives. The English language track was sourced from the best master elements available. There are times in which audio synchronisation will appear loose against the picture, due to the fact that the audio was fully recorded in post-production.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films
Restoration Services: L'Immagine Ritrovata, Bologna

The original film and audio elements for *Erik the Conqueror* were made available for this restoration by Intramovies.

Intramovies: Paola Montavani, Paola Corvino

L'Immagine Ritrovata: Simone Arminio, Gilles Barberis, Valeria Bigongiali, Diego Mercuriali, Julia Mettenleiter, Alessia Navantieri, Caterina Palpacelli, Davide Pozzi, Elena Tammaccaro, Giandomenico Zappa

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PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Michael Mackenzie
Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

Authoring The Engine House

Subtitling dayfornight*

Artist Graham Humphreys

Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Ewan Cant, Kat Ellinger, Uwe Huber, Graham Humphreys, Sonali Joshi,
Sigrid Larsen, Tim Lucas, Leroy Moore, Anthony Nield



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