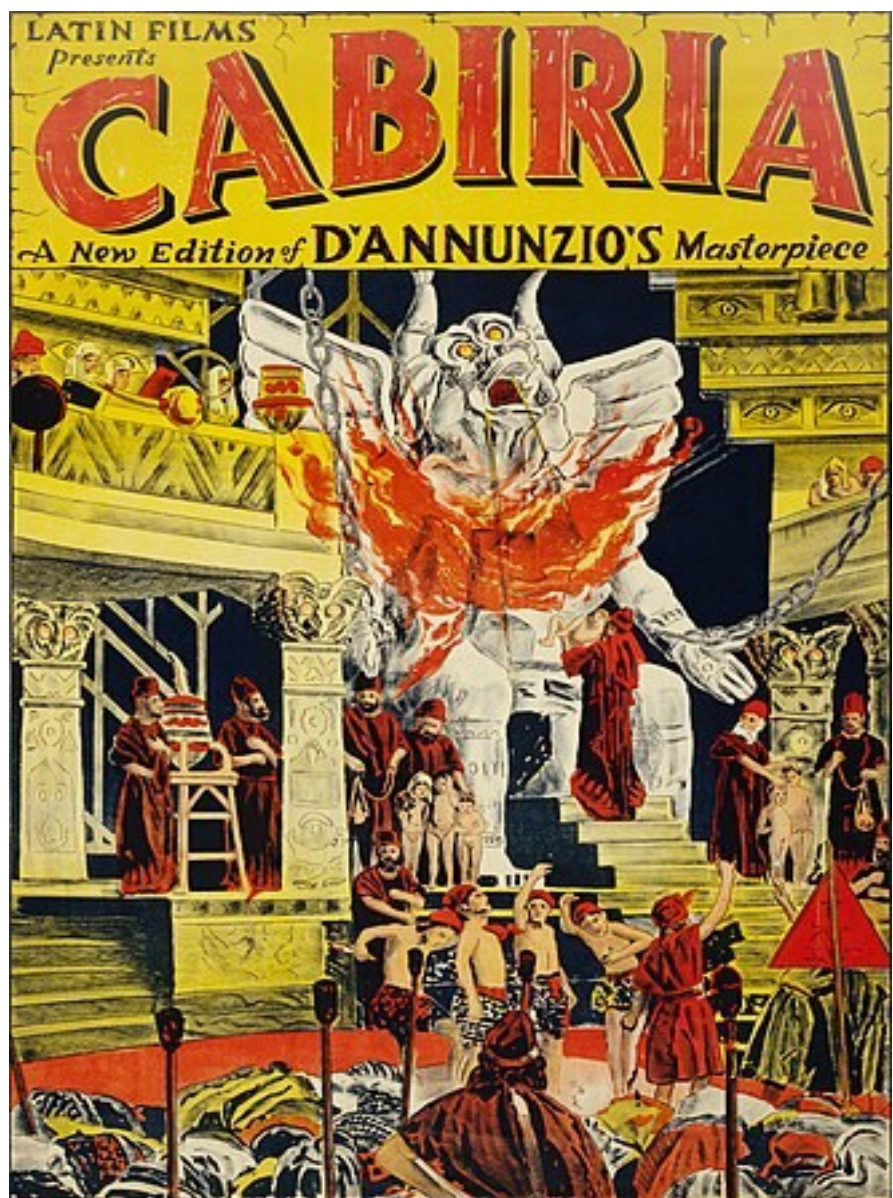


## PEPLUM FILMS: AN INTRODUCTION

Peplum films, otherwise known as “sword-and-sandal” films, were named after the garment of the same name worn by ancient Greeks and Romans. The genre is defined largely by Italian adventure films that had subjects set in antiquity, often with plots based loosely on Greco-Roman history and mythology. Most featured a superhumanly strong man as the protagonist, such as Hercules or Samson. The peplum genre originated during the silent film era, with the release of producer-director Giovanni Pastrone’s epic *Cabiria*, in 1914. It featured a popular early sword-and-sandal character, Maciste, a loyal, heroic servant possessing superhuman strength. Strongman Bartolomeo Pagano became famous in the role. The Maciste character appeared in at least two dozen Italian silent films from 1914 through 1926.



Poster for the film *Cabiria* (1914)



*Hercules* (1958) by Pietro Francisci



*Gli Amori di Ercole/The Loves of Hercules* (1960)



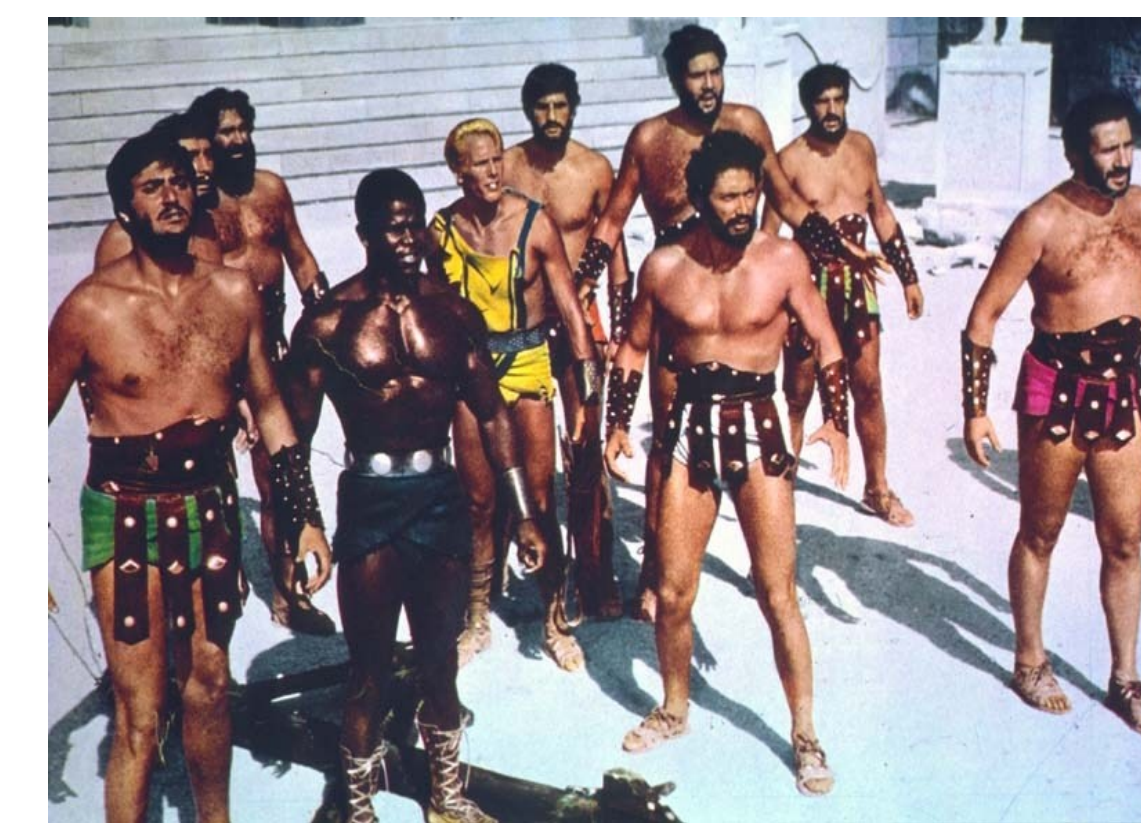
Sculpture of the Goddess  
Athena Wearing a Peplum



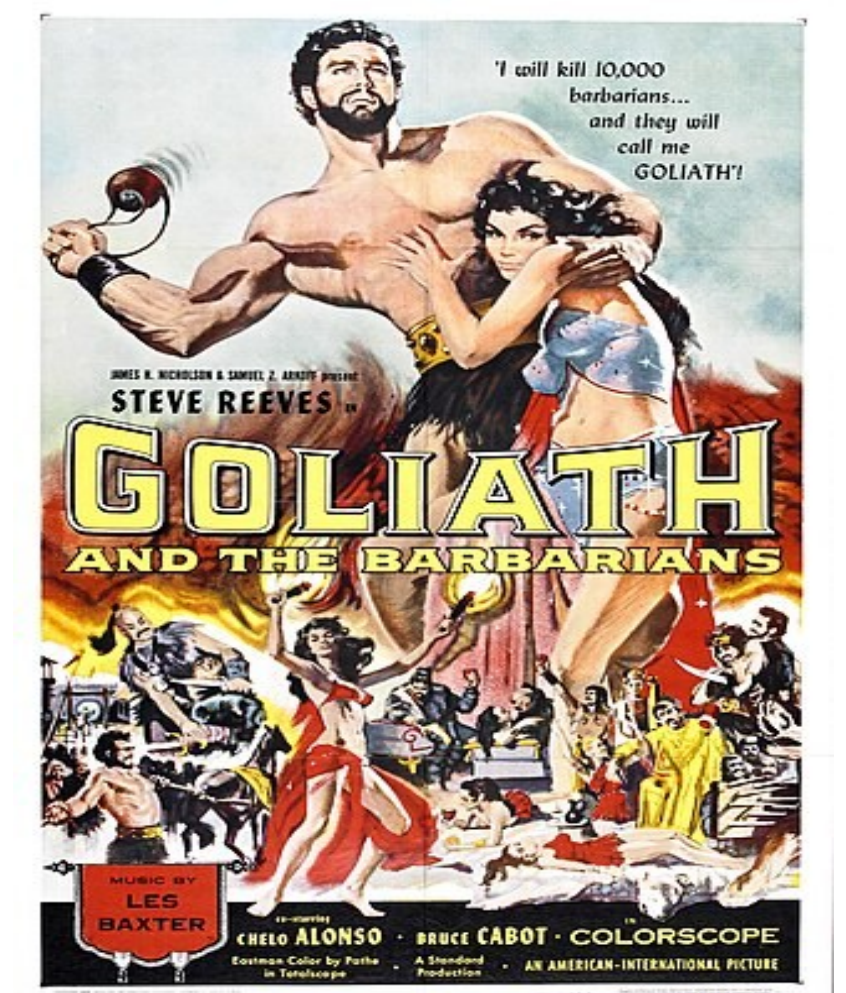
Poster for *Maciste Against the Sheik*, 1926

*While no one is making a claim that these films are or ever were great art, they certainly were (and remain) great entertainment...[T]he creative personnel and technical craftsmen responsible for these epics-on-a budget tried hard to make good films. And they did.*

*Kinnard and Crnkovich. Italian Sword and Sandal Films: 1908-1990. McFarland and Company, 2017.*



*Arrivano i Titani/My Son, The Hero* (1962)



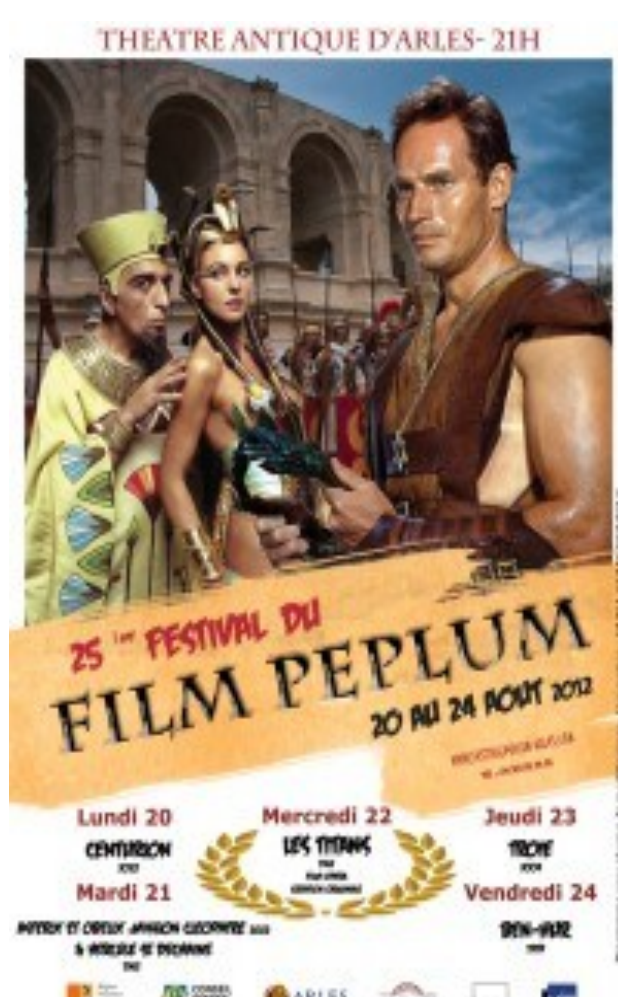
Poster for the film *Goliath and the Barbarians* (1959)

## GOLDEN AGE OF PEPLUM FILMS

Primarily made in Italy, peplum films had their heyday from 1959 to 1965. Italian filmmakers sought to emulate Hollywood epics, such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben-Hur* (1959), but the Italian sword-and-sandal films were much more cheaply produced than those big-budget films. The genre's popularity began with the U.S. release of Italian-made *Le Fatiche di Ercole* in 1958. American producer Joseph E. Levine renamed the film *Hercules* and successfully promoted it in the U.S., leading to a series of 19 Hercules movies that were made in Italy in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Almost all peplum films featured bodybuilder stars, and despite their low budgets and English dubbing, many of the films enjoyed widespread popularity among audiences; however, by 1965, their popularity waned, and they were replaced almost overnight by the Italian-produced “spaghetti westerns.”

*A film such as Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia’s ludicrous Ursus in the Valley of the Lions (1961) is true and quintessential sword-and-sandal fare: hot nonsense mixing a vaguely ancient milieu with outright fantasy involving an eye-poppingly bodybuilt, raised-by-lions hero.*

*Guy Lodge. Gladiator II and the Best Sword-and-Sandal Movies. The Guardian, January 25, 2025.*



Peplum Film Festival  
Poster, Arles, France, 2012



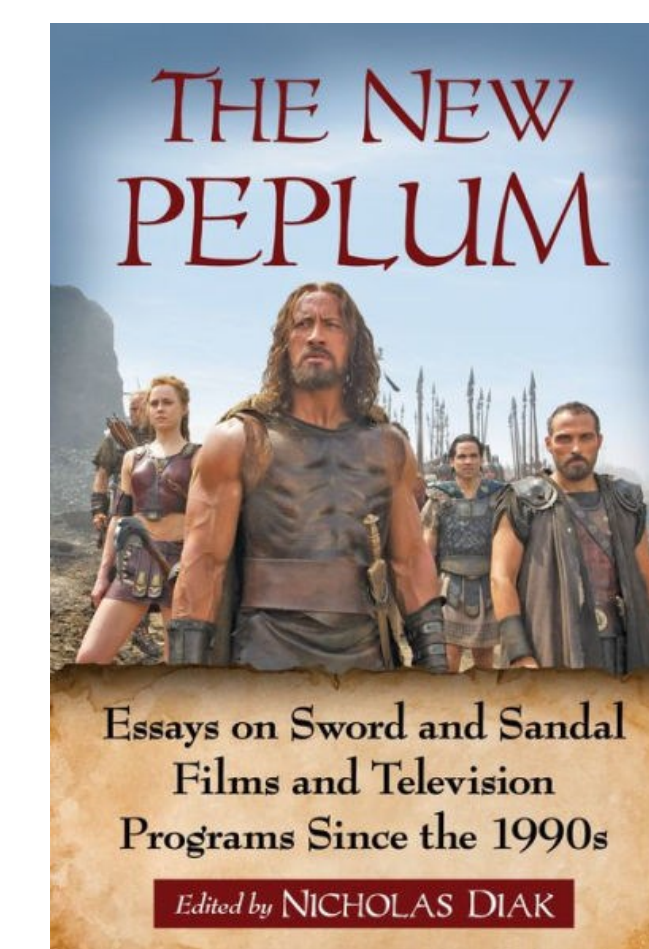
Peplum Film Festival Poster,  
Arles, France, 2021



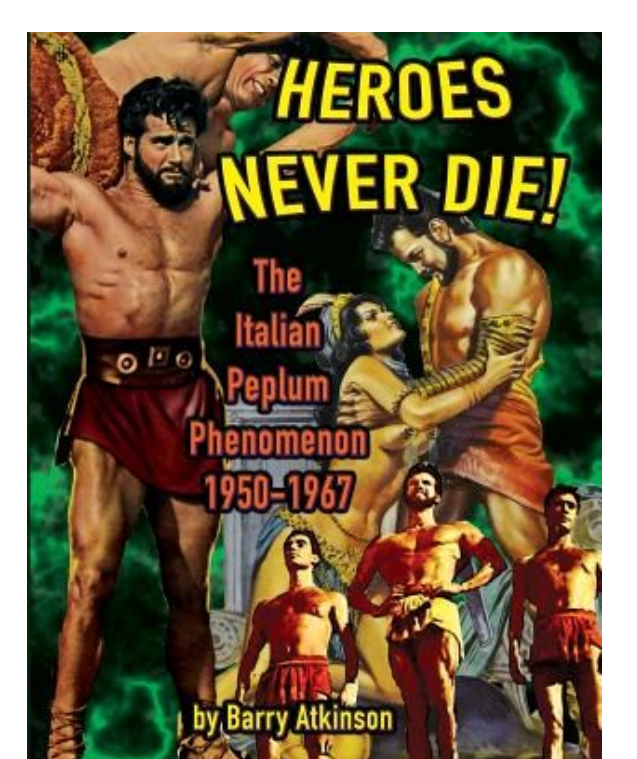
Peplum Classic Film Festival Poster,  
Catalonia, Spain, 2023

## POPULAR CULTURE & SCHOLARSHIP

The peplum genre continues to resonate with film aficionados today. It is featured in film festivals around the world and has become the subject of popular and scholarly books, as well as being reflected in comic books, toys, and games. The contrived plots, overdubbed dialogue, novice acting skills of the bodybuilder leads, and primitive special effects have given these films a certain camp appeal in contemporary culture.



Book by Nicholas Diak,  
McFarland, 2018



Book by Barry Atkinson,  
Midnight Marquee Press,  
2018



Book by David Chapman, Collectors Press, 2002



Peplum Festival Poster, University of Orléans, France, 2026