

Selling *Cabiria* (1914) in the British Marketplace

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When pirates put the infant *Cabiria* on sale in the Carthaginian market early in the second episode of the Italian epic *Cabiria* (1914), she is swiftly bought by the High Priest of Moloch. But selling the film to non-Italian audiences in and beyond 1914, given its colonial rescue fantasy and its spectacular celebration of a nationalist war of empire in Africa through the vehicle of Roman history, was more of a challenge. *Cabiria* was purchased for British consumption in April 1914, so why was it not shown in the UK until more than a year later? When it was finally shown, how was it advertised and exhibited for British audiences in the context of the Great War, and how was it reviewed? It is now recognised that exclusive focus on national cinemas and the specific history of their film production overlooks the dynamic, transnational character of the silent era. This article aims to put the United Kingdom more firmly on the map of *Cabiria*'s cultural geography and demonstrate that the film is more than a magnificent product of the Turinese studio Itala.

British programmes that survive in the BFI National Archive and contemporary press reports demonstrate that *Cabiria* was successfully screened across the country for most of the year between 1915 and 1916. The initial delay from April 1914 may have had a number of causes: the scale of the film's exhibition requirements, the relative absence of an Anglophone hook to draw audiences in and the presence instead of a D'Annunzian rhetoric of Italian nationhood achieved through conquest in Africa that was wholly at odds with the British policy to defend its own empire. When the film was finally released in May 1915, initial publicity placed emphasis on its artistry rather than its D'Annunzian warmongering. But after Italy joined the Allies in May 1915, the film was celebrated as a masterpiece by D'Annunzio, seen as the committed soldier and patriot of a wartime ally, and its viewing recommended as an act of wartime patriotism. The exhibition of the film fizzled out in local cinemas around summer 1916 when war losses increased radically, and its promotion returned to the language of spectacle and education in history. I argue that in the cultural context of cinema-going in Britain during the First World War, *Cabiria* becomes almost a different film from the one shown in Italy or in other Anglophone cultures and takes on quite distinct meanings.



The Italian epic *Cabiria*, released in 1914 but set during the second Punic War between Rome and Carthage (218 to 201 BCE), achieved extraordinary success both in Italy and many other countries and had a profound impact on the development of the genre of the historical film thereafter.¹ The fictional infant who gives her name to the film is separated at its opening from her idyllic Roman family by the sudden eruption of Mount Etna, captured by pirates and taken to Carthage. There the child is sold in the slave market for sacrifice to the savage god Moloch. Although she is rescued from that terrible fate by the Roman soldier Fulvius and his slave Maciste, she remains trapped in Carthage until adulthood, as military conflict continues to rage between the two countries. By the close of the film, she is freed once again and manages this time to sail away to Rome in the loving arms of Fulvius. *Cabiria* is now considered a milestone in the history of cinema, whose epic narrative scale, long running time, high production values and ambitious action scenes (such as the eruption of Mount Etna, the child sacrifice at the Temple of Moloch, the crossing of the Alps by Hannibal accompanied by his army and war elephants, the destruction of the Roman fleet at Syracuse or the siege of the city of Cirta) influenced the epic filmmaking of directors like D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. The imaginative use of tracking shots achieved through the placement of a camera on a moving dolly brought a visual energy to the huge, architecturally elaborate sets that carefully differentiated between a classicized Roman homeland and a hybrid African Other (composed variously of Greek, Assyrian and Egyptian elements).² The utilisation of elaborate period costumes, multiple props, and the choreography of thousands of extras enhanced the film's reconstruction of ancient history as a spectacular, immersive dreamworld.

That dreamworld and the double rescue fantasy contained within it have been understood by scholars as a projection forward from the past of Italian nationhood achieved through wars of empire (Welch 2016: 191–231; Agbamu 2024: 107–26). In this essay, I want to elaborate on the investigations already undertaken into the successful distribution of *Cabiria* and this imperialist message across Italy and the world, especially that by Chiara Caranti (2006). It is now recognised that exclusive focus on national cinemas and the specific history of their film production overlooks

¹ The scholarship on *Cabiria* is substantial. Alovisio 2014 is a useful introduction to the film. Other key works include: Bertetto and Rondolino 1998; Alovisio and Barbera 2006; Blom 2023.

² See Blom 2023: 169–284 for detailed discussion of the potential sources for the set and costume designs in *Cabiria*. He documents how the director Giovanni Pastrone was inspired both by fashionable interest in the supposed exoticism of Carthage (featuring in nineteenth-century literature, theatre, opera and paintings, especially Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* of 1862 and the illustrations produced for a 1900 reedition of it by Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse), and by his direct acquisition of knowledge about Punic culture (obtained from museum collections and catalogues), out of which he created his own ancient dreamworld.

the dynamic, transnational character of the silent era. The strategy of mapping the movement of silent films across nations and investigating their distribution, exhibition and reception in diverse contexts provides a more rounded and complex cultural history for cinema.³ I would like to ask, if *Cabiria* was purchased for British consumption in April 1914, why was it not shown in the UK until more than a year later? When it was finally shown, how was it advertised and exhibited for British audiences in the context of the First World War and Britain's own imperial goals, and how was it reviewed?⁴ This essay puts the United Kingdom more firmly on the map of *Cabiria*'s cultural geography and demonstrates that the film is more than a magnificent achievement of the Turinese studio Itala and the Italian film industry. The film takes on new meaning in its encounter with the political and social context of cinema-going in Great Britain in 1915 and 1916, as a demonstration for British audiences of Italy's commitment to the Allied side in the Great War.

Cabiria simultaneously celebrated ancient and modern wars of empire in multiple ways addressed to all levels of Italian society. The film gave considerable space to the lowly character Maciste (performed in blackface by an Italian dockworker, Bartolomeo Pagano). He loyally serves the interests of the Roman empire, displaying astonishing acts of strength, enterprise and even tenderness as he attempts on multiple occasions to rescue the Roman Cabiria from Carthaginian sacrifice or, later, servitude. Maciste's circus-style heroic feats and comic gestures appealed greatly to cinema audiences both in Italy and abroad, and he became so popular that the character was foregrounded in later publicity for the film and then starred in many spin-offs set in other times and places (Reich 2015). In order to testify to the value of *Cabiria* as a work of high culture, the film's director Giovanni Pastrone arranged that the film be attributed not to himself but to the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio.⁵ The screen title card, the studio programmes and all publicity and promotional events marked the film as under the authorship of the celebrated Italian nationalist (**Figures 1a and 1b**).

³ For a large-scale example concerning the exhibition of silent European cinema in Australasia, see Allen 2022: 1–18.

⁴ Currently, the best accessible print of *Cabiria* is the version restored in 2006 by the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, of which the BFI holds a copy. The 35mm viewing copy in the BFI collection (identifier 25365) predates the restoration with a stock date of 1955, and elements of it, especially reel 3, are quite worn. The Museo in Turin, as the city in which *Cabiria* was made, also possesses a wealth of relevant paratextual materials, such as production photographs, stills, posters, programmes, advertising sheets, contracts, correspondence, screenplays, daily agendas, editing sheets, intertitles and their translations into multiple other languages, musical scores, and censorship approvals. They can mostly be found by searching for the film on the Museo's website: <https://www.museocinema.it>.

⁵ There has been much discussion of D'Annunzio's involvement with the film, especially its relatively limited nature. See e.g. Alovisio 2014: 37–46.

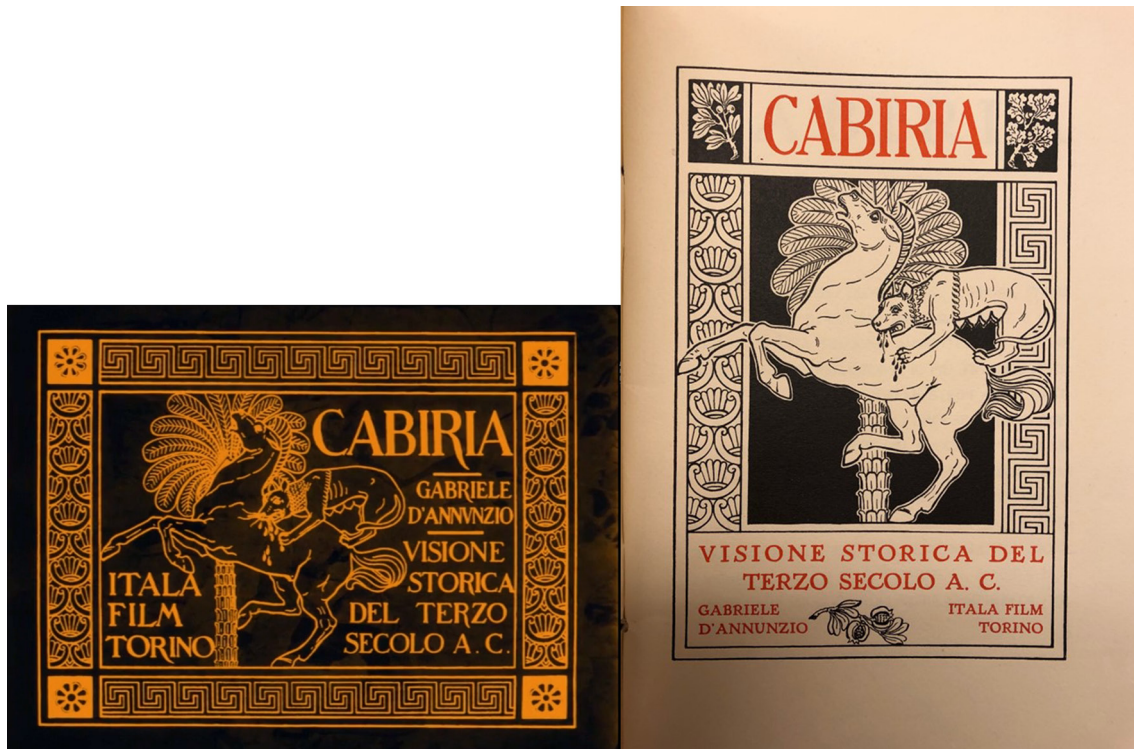


Figure 1: a: Screenshot of the Italian title of *Cabiria* (Pastrone 1914), Coll. Museo Nazionale del Cinema. b: Interior page of luxury programme produced by Itala for Italian screenings of *Cabiria* (Pastrone 1914), Coll. Museo Nazionale del Cinema.

The lyrical intertitles the poet provided, as well as the introduction presented under his signature in the Italian programmes, layered over the film's spectacular visual imagery a rhetoric that was both colonial and imperialist. The innocent girl Cabiria embodies the supposed vulnerability of Rome needing rescue from Carthaginian depredation. According to D'Annunzio, the film also memorialised more broadly the story of a war of empire and a clash between civilisations (or, in English translation of the programme, 'the supreme conflict of two opposing races'). That clash was illustrated symbolically on screen and in the programme by the Roman she-wolf savaging the Punic horse. Through strategies such as these, *Cabiria* projects forward from Roman antiquity into the modern world Italian fantasies of nationhood achieved through a return to conquest in North Africa.⁶

Chiara Caranti has already provided a detailed exploration of how the Itala film studio, having invested so heavily in making the film, distributed multiple copies

⁶ Agbamu 2024: 107–26 discusses how *Cabiria* projects the Africa of Roman antiquity onto the modern Italian national imaginary, cf. Welch 2016: 191–231. That the film's visual images seem to offer a less glorious story than its words is recognised by Alovio 2014: 46–53.

of *Cabiria* across Italy and the rest of the world and invested large sums in publicity (striking posters, production photographs, luxurious souvenir brochures in the manner of operatic libretti, and the repeated exposure of D'Annunzio in press interviews). Similarly, the premieres of *Cabiria* in Italy (Turin and Milan on 18 April, Rome on 21 April 1914) were devised as grand events. They were staged at prestigious opera houses, utilised large orchestras, provided spectators with a luxury edition of the programme containing etched illustrations, and delivered a visual and aural feast that lasted upwards of three hours. For the premiere in Rome, a pilot flew over the city dropping flyers to advertise the projection of the film that evening at Teatro Costanzi (now named Teatro dell'Opera), with 75 musicians, a chorus of 40 voices and a solo baritone performing the carefully composed score (Caranti 2006: 151–54). Similar distribution and publicity strategies were deployed across Europe and in other global markets to sell the film, and it was generally met with considerable enthusiasm in reviews (Caranti 2006: 154–67).⁷

To pursue this investigation specifically into the circulation and consumption of *Cabiria* in Britain, I have drawn on several programmes for British theatre screenings that survive in the Special Collections of the British Film Institute National Archive. I have also utilised the *British Newspaper Archive* (<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>), which continues to digitise the British Library's vast collection of newspapers and at this stage contains runs of titles from metropolises such as Birmingham, Manchester and York, and counties such as Staffordshire and Sussex, as well as provincial towns and local London boroughs. This has enabled me to piece together from some of the advertisements, news items and reviews – some of cinema's 'multiple interfaces' as Laura Isabel Serna calls them (2021) – the story of *Cabiria*'s travels through London and across the country from May 1915 until around summer 1916.⁸

Soon after the premieres of *Cabiria* in Italy, on 25 April 1914, Itala sold six copies of the film to the Tyler Film Company for British distribution and printed English-language programmes for use in Anglophone markets. The Italian and the British press both announced that the film would start screening in May, and four more prints were ordered by another distributor in August; nevertheless, it was not exhibited in the United Kingdom until more than a year after that (Caranti 2006: 106–7).⁹ This raises a question: what obstacles might there have been to *Cabiria*'s British release?

First, to exhibit *Cabiria* on the scale set by its Italian premieres would have required considerable expense when an Anglophone hook to pull paying audiences in was

⁷ Compare Allen 2022: 170–83 for the film's distribution, exhibition and reception in Australasia and Bertellini 2006 in the USA.

⁸ Compare Allen 2022 for her evidential base when investigating the circulation of European silent cinema in Australasia.

⁹ A brief but useful account of the fortunes of *Cabiria* in Britain is given by Ercole 2012: 161.

noticeably absent. By 1914, as Ian Christie and others have demonstrated,¹⁰ a variety of Italian antiquity films had already experienced considerable success in Britain, most notably Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* (1913), released by the Cines studio. This adaptation to screen of the celebrated novel about Neronian Rome by Henryk Sienkiewicz was heavily promoted, had a wide and prolonged circulation, and was even shown for four weeks at the exceptionally prestigious setting of the Royal Albert Hall. So, in Britain, Italian historical epics had the potential to involve high-class venues, large orchestras, bookable seats, high ticket prices, long runs and even a sense of national occasion (as when the screening of *Quo vadis?* at the Albert Hall was witnessed by King George V and Queen Mary). *Quo vadis?* offered a story of Christian struggle against Roman decadence that appealed strongly to British moral sensibilities. In that same year, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (*Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*) released by the Ambrosio studio was publicised as an adaptation to screen of an important British literary work by Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton, while *Antony and Cleopatra* (*Marcantonio e Cleopatra*), also from Cines, could rely on the familiarity of Shakespeare's play. Consequently, all these epic films had ready-made selling points in Britain beyond their spectacular scale, their realistic material detail and a capacity to dignify cinema with the cultural value of art and pedagogic purpose.¹¹

After the British trade press was given the opportunity to see the full three-hour version of *Cabiria* in a preview at the Tyler Film company in London in late April 1914, *The Bioscope* for 30 April declared the film to be 'the triumph of triumphs', a marvellously unique colossal spectacle. Even though they had experienced a soundless screening, the trade reviewer was much taken by Itala's claim to have integrated music with the visual drama, and categorised the film as neither theatre, concert nor cinema but, uniquely, 'a Pictorial Music Drama, a Visualised Tone Poem, a Film Opera'. *Cabiria*, they were certain, would be the final answer to critics of the picture theatre. They expressed concern, however, that the average spectator would not have a clear recollection of the second Punic War, the present intertitles were poetic but hard to digest and the film was just too long. As these concerns might suggest, even when *Cabiria* was finally exhibited in Britain it was never shown on the scale of *Quo vadis?*¹²

A second obstacle to the exhibition of *Cabiria* in Britain lay in the film's association with D'Annunzio. That association, as well as his specific interventions, facilitated an understanding of the film then (as now) as a summoning of modern Italians to renew

¹⁰ See Robinson 1992 and Osvaldo 1982, in addition to Christie 2013.

¹¹ The comparable success of *Quo vadis?* in the United States is discussed by Klenotic 2022.

¹² For further discussion of this preview in *The Bioscope* for 30 April 1914, see Robinson 1992: 90–93. Cf. similar concerns expressed in *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* for 30 April 1914, p. 72.

war and empire in Africa. The *Gazetta di Torino* (21 April 1914), for example, commented excitedly that ‘the contemplation of the greatness and the energy of Rome can and must again be the incitement of modern Italy, which welcomes a film that so nobly exalts us to such greatness’ (Agbamu 2024: 112). That exaltation would have been less welcome to British audiences, not least in 1914.

A third, and interrelated, obstacle to the exhibition of *Cabiria* in Britain might have been the timing of the film’s acquisition in late April 1914. In her discussion of the distribution of *Cabiria* across Italy, Chiara Caranti notes that the film was only shown for the nights of 26 and 27 June 1914 in Trieste before its expected run was interrupted by the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. *Cabiria* did not return there until July and then only ran for one week, given that Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on 28 July. Caranti suggests that the exhibition of *Cabiria* was reduced in areas close to the conflict as they felt the effects of the war most strongly (2006: 155). In Britain, however, war was not a matter of proximity but, by 4 August 1914, of military engagement. The main reason for Britain to join the fight would be to defend its own empire and its supremacy from the perceived threat posed to the nation by Germany. Italy’s ambition for imperial expansion (seemingly expressed by the D’Annunzian elements of *Cabiria*) alongside its membership of the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary would have been wholly at odds with Britain’s policy of imperial defence. In late April 1914, therefore, by which time approximately 30% of the African continent was controlled by Britain and 60% by six other European nations combined, when those nations were riven by imperial competition and growing militarism, it was not easy in Britain to ignore *Cabiria*’s overarching theme of renewed Italian conquest on African shores.¹³

These last two obstacles to the exhibition of *Cabiria* in Britain may go some way to explain why, in contrast, its exhibition in the United States (the biggest film market in the world) followed immediately on from the film’s Italian premieres.¹⁴ On 1 June 1914, the American premiere at the Knickerbocker, a legitimate theatre on Broadway in New York (**Figure 2**), conferred a sense of important political occasion and international cultural exchange that, I would argue, was impossible in Britain at the time. The balconies to the left of the stage were draped with American flags and those to the right with Italian. Invitations were extended to the Italian consul general, representatives of the Italian government and leaders of the American and Italian film industries, as well as to literary figures.

¹³ Marcuzzi 2020 observes the mismatch between Britain’s geopolitical strategy of imperial defence and Italy’s of imperial expansion prior to their reconciliation during the Great War.

¹⁴ For the exhibition of *Cabiria* in the United States and American responses to the film, see Bertellini 2006: 174–80.

Yet, even in the United States (which did not enter the First World War until 1917), only the Italo-American press welcomed the patriotic and nationalistic dimensions of *Cabiria*. Elsewhere reviewers were critical of what they saw as the associated verbosity of the intertitles, the excessive complexity of the plot and the theatricality of the acting. However, they praised in the highest terms this Italian demonstration of astonishing innovation in motion pictures (in particular the epic film's spectacular scale, scenographic complexity and use of a dolly to move the camera through the sets and open up cinematic space). Five months later, in October 1914, *Cabiria* was still being shown in New York at the Knickerbocker and now also at lower cost theatres.



Figure 2: Frontage of the Knickerbocker Theatre in New York during *Cabiria*'s seven-month run, Coll. Museo Nazionale del Cinema.

A year after the Italian premieres of *Cabiria*, in late April 1915, the agent Horace Dickson secured the rights for distribution of the film in Britain. In May, he arranged private viewings, promoted it in the press and printed his own programmes. However, his programmes were not like those that had been provided in 1914 by Itala for use in Anglophone markets (Figure 3 a–c). The cover of Dickson’s programme draws on knowledge in Britain of Gabriele D’Annunzio as a celebrated poet to identify the film as his ‘great unwritten masterpiece’ (unwritten because it has been visualised instead). Yet the signature placed on the cover and to mark the authorship of the interior foreword is not that of D’Annunzio but that of the British distributor. In his foreword, Dickson writes not of a war of empire or a clash between races but, for example, of the imaginative use of the camera in the film. He opens his foreword with an illustrative photograph bought from Itala that displays the elaborate scaffolding required to create the Temple of Moloch set and declares at the end of his foreword that *Cabiria* has established ‘a new standard in Kinematography’. Here the film is presented as a triumph of artistry rather than empire, so not the kind of triumph to be illustrated by a Roman wolf savaging a Punic horse. The text that follows is not an English translation of the D’Annunzian intertitles, as in Itala’s version, but a relatively prosaic outline of the plot. This dilution of *Cabiria*’s apparent warmongering was also evident in the form of the film by the time it was screened in London in September. Its length had been cut to around two hours and its English intertitles stripped of most of their D’Annunzian expressiveness.

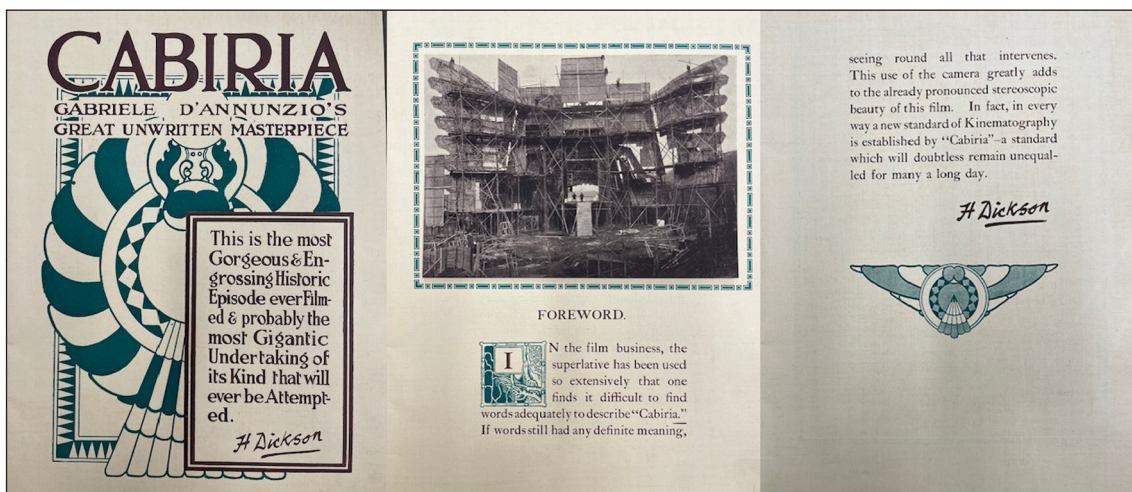


Figure 3 a–c: The cover and the opening and concluding pages of the foreword for the programme created for the British market by Horace Dickson in 1915 (BFI Special Collections, Ephemera: ITM-2731).

However, when Italy declared war on 23 May 1915 and marched against Austria-Hungary, Dickson and the trade press were quick to exploit the topicality the recent activities of D'Annunzio appeared to give to the upcoming film. Adopting a commanding pose as the voice of the nation, D'Annunzio had delivered a speech in Rome at the Teatro Costanzi to an enthralled audience against neutrality and in favour of Italy's intervention in the war in Europe. The event was commemorated in a colour lithograph on the front cover of the widely distributed weekly *Domenica del Corriere* for 23–30 May 1915 (Figure 4).¹⁵ In that same week, introducing the imminent exhibition of *Cabiria* in Britain, the trade paper the *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* wrote on 27 May about D'Annunzio as a patriot – but unlike the patriot of the 1911–1912 Italo-Turkish War in Libya (towards which British opinion had been hostile), he is here represented as a patriot of a completely different sort:

There is, too, at this particular moment a certain topical interest in the film, which marks it out from all other films on the market. “Cabiria” is the work of Italy's greatest poet and patriot – the man whose name is today on the lips of everyone, for Gabriele D'Annunzio has done more than any single individual in the Italian peninsula during the last months to set the spirit of patriotism aflame in the mind of the Roman nation. He is the people's hero, and his name may yet be as familiar in this country as in his own, for he is destined by fate to play an increasingly important part in the work to which Italy has now definitely put her hand.¹⁶

Similarly, when *Cabiria* was initially exhibited in Manchester's Free Trade Hall in August 1915,¹⁷ the local paper *The Manchester Courier* (23 August 1915) carried an advertisement that led with a picture of the poet, the label ‘Gabriele D'Annunzio – The voice that awakened Italy’, and a declaration that: ‘It was D'Annunzio, more than any statesman, who has led the war movement in Italy, and his burning eloquence inspired his countrymen to make the great decision. He wrote the story of CABIRIA’.

¹⁵ On such self-fashioning by D'Annunzio, see Pieri 2016: 335–37.

¹⁶ Woodhouse 1987: 252–53 notes that once D'Annunzio advocated Italian intervention in the war, the British press (most notably *The Times*) began to celebrate him as a popular hero.

¹⁷ As recorded in *The Bioscope* for 19 August and 26 August 1915.



Figure 4: The cover of *La Domenica del Corriere* for 23 to 30 May 1915, designed by Achille Beltrame. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Achille_beltrami_D%27annunzio_contro_gioiottismo.jpg.

Various British newspapers provide some detail concerning the London premiere of *Cabiria* that finally took place on 27 September 1915 in the West End Cinema. As a dedicated venue, in the heart of London's theatreland, it was architecturally ambitious and opulently appointed, seating around 700 people in two tiers linked by a marble staircase, and boasting a large central dome, pavilioned boxes, a café, ushers and

doormen, and, outside, a red neon sign.¹⁸ *The Globe* newspaper for 28 September reported that on the night of the premiere the cinema had been crowded with a remarkably smart audience and included many officers on leave from the front. Tumultuous applause broke out when Maciste rescued Cabiria from the temple of Moloch. *The Times* for 28 September also noted that the manager had announced the takings would be given to the Italian Red Cross fund at an upcoming matinee. Scholars who have studied the culture of cinema in wartime Britain would describe that announcement as an example of the ‘practical patriotism’ exercised by cinema managers in this critical time of war, to demonstrate to the British government the potential benefits to the nation of cinemagoing. Other practices included discounted admission for soldiers, participation in recruitment drives, patriotic décor, and the inclusion in programmes of war subjects and of footage from the front.¹⁹ Such patriotism was a particular necessity for the West End cinema as it had been accused by the *Evening News* of being under enemy German ownership. Hence the programme for *Cabiria*’s exhibition there seeks to reassure audiences that ‘This theatre has been acquired by G. F. Sexton, a British citizen, who has assumed control and eliminated the entire alien interest originally connected with the direction of the house’.²⁰

It is in the context then of British patriotism and Italy’s engagement on the side of the Allies that we should interpret the West End Cinema programme devised specifically for the week of 4 to 10 October 1915 that survives in the Special Collections of the BFI among its cinema ephemera (**Figure 5 a–c**). We see that, in that week, *Cabiria* was shown twice daily framed by a variety package of other pictures (‘dramatic, humorous and topical’), including official documentary footage from France of the visit of King Albert of Belgium to the front in the company of General Joseph Joffre and President Raymond Poincaré (on both occasions item 7 in the package of shorts). The programme for that week, following the strategies of the distributor Dickson, also introduces its summary of *Cabiria*’s plotline with reference to D’Annunzio as the man ‘whose genius awoke the soul of Italy to the side of the Allies in the present war’. By October 1914, D’Annunzio had become even more famous in Britain as an active soldier and aviator, having thrown pro-Italian flyers from his plane in a daring flight over Austrian-occupied Trieste two months earlier (Woodhouse 1987: 252–53; Pieri 2016: 335–37).

¹⁸ Some details are provided on the website *London’s Silent Cinemas*, <https://www.londonssilentcinemas.com/westendexhibits/west-end-cinema-theatre> [accessed 28 April 2025]. See also Hammond 2023: 145–46.

¹⁹ For the exercise by cinema managers of a ‘practical patriotism’ during the Great War, see Hammond 2006: 70–97 and Engelen, DeBauche and Hammond 2015, especially pp. 638–43 on cinemagoing in wartime Southampton.

²⁰ The website of *London’s Silent Cinemas*, n. 15 abv. remarks upon the anti-German attacks on the West End Cinema by the *Evening News* in August 1914 and its subsequent change of ownership.

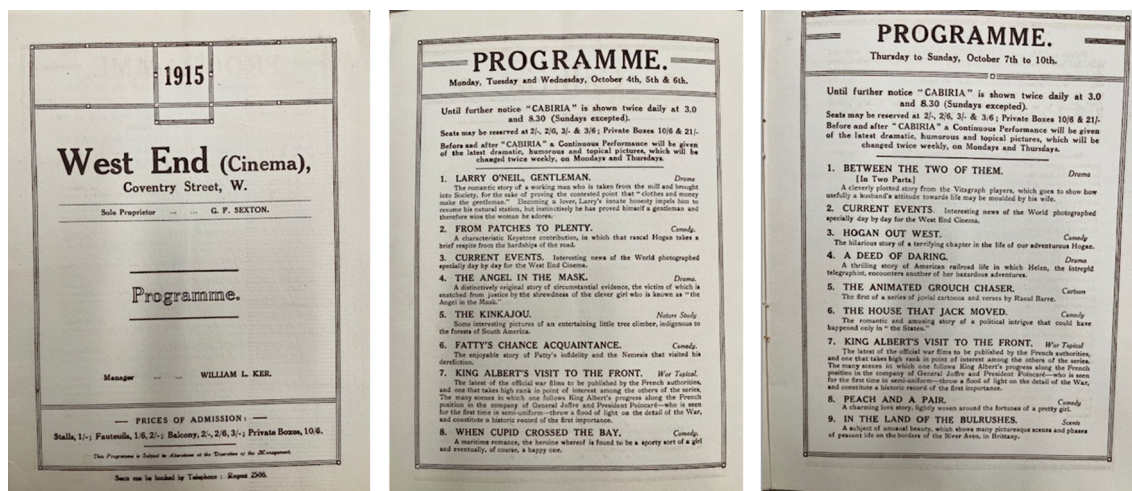


Figure 5 a-c: Pages from the programme for the West End Cinema, London, for 4 to 10 October 1915 (from the BFI Special Collections, Ephemera: ITM-2731).

On Thursday 7 October 1915, the matinee screening of *Cabiria* was preceded by a rousing speech from the Secretary of the Italian Chamber of Commerce, Tullio Sambucetti, and all the takings were given to the Pro Italia committee that had been set up by the British-Italian producer and film director Arrigo Bocchi to support the Italian war effort through fundraising events.²¹ In the *Daily Express* for 6 October, this screening of *Cabiria* was listed as one of the many fundraising events due to take place across London the next day because the Pro Italia committee had designated 7 October 'Italy's Flag Day'. The paper explained:

London will wear the red, white, and green to-morrow, which is Italian Flag Day. Many of the street sellers are expected to dress in Italian national costumes. Besides the usual small flags, printed silk handkerchiefs and coloured postcards with reproductions of some of the famous regimental uniforms – such as the Bersaglieri – will be on sale. The collection will be in aid of Italian soldiers and sailors' families residing in the United Kingdom and the Italian Red Cross. Nearly £12,000 has already been subscribed. Italian waiters in many hotels will show their patriotism by pooling their tips and giving a percentage to the fund. Several Italian concerts will be given, and the West End Cinema will present the entire receipts of D'Annunzio's film play, "Cabiria", to the Pro Italia Committee.²²

²¹ See Ercole 2012 on the involvement of the Italian diaspora in the wartime exhibition of films in London.

²² A similar account is given in the *London Daily Chronicle* for 6 October 1915.

By these means, the Pro Italia committee and the West End Cinema together concocted a quite different sense of occasion – urgent, charitable and martial – than that created for the premiere of *Cabiria* in the Knickerbocker Theatre, New York, back in June 1914.

This invitation to experience *Cabiria* as a demonstration of Italy's commitment to the Great War continued as the film circulated in local cinemas in and outside London. The *Birkenhead News* for 9 October 1915, reporting to its readers in Merseyside, thus referred to the events of the second Punic War as 'the story of a great world war', erroneously described D'Annunzio as Italy's War Minister, and suggested that the film's reconstruction of the distant past almost paralleled the present for tragedy. On the same day, an advertisement in the *Newcastle Journal* for the screening of *Cabiria* categorised it as 'a new war topical'. As British forces began to experience heavy losses at the front, however, such analogies between the Second Punic War and the current war were expressed in local British newspapers rather less excitedly. On 22 December 1915, the *Rochdale Observer* remarked:

It is very appropriate, in these days of modern warfare on the most gigantic scale the world has ever seen, that our people should have an opportunity of contrasting the means and weapons now employed with those which did duty in the far off days of antiquity. No better chance of making this study in contrasts could be afforded most of us than that given the proprietors of the Rochdale Hippodrome, where the famous cinema masterpiece "Cabiria" is being represented nightly this week, with a matinee Friday and special performances on Christmas Day.

Here a paper for residents of a town in Greater Manchester testifies not to a parallel but to a contrast between antiquity and modernity; war now, it suggests, is so much worse than it was in Roman times. It adds that the management of the Rochdale Hippodrome is offering half price for school children of the borough, presumably in order that they might be more likely to experience this contrastive history lesson.

The exhibition of *Cabiria* in local cinemas across Britain appears to have fizzled out by the summer of 1916, as war losses increased further.²³ In Southeast England, on 10 Saturday June 1916, the *Bexhill-on-Sea Chronicle* reported on how the town had responded to the exceptional loss of Lord Kitchener. Kitchener, the paper respectfully observed, had been the British secretary of state for war and had organised a huge volunteer army but had died five days earlier when the ship he was on struck a German

²³ Hammond 2006: 98–127 explores changes in Britain in the practices of film exhibition and consumption from late 1915 through 1916, as understanding grew of the Great War's grim realities.

mine. Flags were flown at half-mast at the Town Hall, along the seafront, and at hotels, schools and private homes. While at the cinema, the paper continued:

There were crowded Houses at the Cinema de Luxe on Thursday and yesterday, and before “Cabiria” was produced a series of pictures referring to Lord Kitchener’s great services to the Empire in the past were shown. They closed with the great general’s portrait with a black border, which typified his death. The records of his services to the Empire were greeted with cheers, but the final picture met with a tribute of an exceptional character. Cheer after cheer rang through the cinema and were joined in, it need hardly be added, by the many soldiers present.

The celebration of Gabriele D’Annunzio as a brave Italian soldier who had drawn Italy into the war on the Allied side has here been replaced by the patriotic celebration of the British Field Marshal. Kitchener had symbolised the nation’s will to achieve victory, not least through the striking recruitment posters of 1914 in which his image stared out at the viewer and, pointing directly at them, entreated that they join their country’s army (**Figure 6**). Given that the Bexhill cinema framed its screening of *Cabiria* with a focus on the commemoration of a hero of the British empire, it is no surprise that, on such an occasion, the local paper does not praise the Italian film in terms of its topicality for the current war but only in terms of its spectacular effects (especially the eruption of Etna) and its contribution to showing that cinema can be an educational institution.

The American epic *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) was in British distribution from September 1915, roughly the same time as *Cabiria*. It shared the same large-scale exhibition strategies with orchestra and choir and long runs in prestigious London venues. It also competed with *Cabiria* for audiences.²⁴ Scholars such as Michael Hammond have documented how discourses were created in Britain around *The Birth of a Nation* as an historical epic full of cinematic innovation but also wartime uplift – supposedly teaching a lesson in national and class unity, regeneration achieved through struggle and shared Anglo-American values. Its grotesque message of white supremacy was largely ignored. Like *Cabiria*, it disappeared from cinemas around summer 1916. Around then, British exhibitors were ceasing to imagine the cinema as a place of education in the history of war. They found that there was more profit to be made from it, in terms of supporting the war effort, as a place of recuperation. They turned to screening comedies, melodramas and adventure films as modes of escape for

²⁴ *The Bystander* for 14 October 1915 put *The Birth of a Nation* above *Cabiria* among films currently being shown in London that were heralding a new era for cinematography.

audiences from the traumas of unremitting war (Hammond 2006: 128–53 and 2023: 149–54). In such circumstances, there was no place in British cinema for epics like *The Birth of a Nation* or *Cabiria*.



Figure 6: Modern reproduction of First World War recruitment poster, derived from the cover of *The London Opinion* designed by Alfred Leete (5 September 1914). Source: Sammlung Eybl, Plakatmuseum Wien / Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:30a_Sammlung_Eybl_Gro%C3%9Fbritannien._Alfred_Leete_\(1882%E2%80%931933\)_Britons_\(Kitchener\)_wants_you_\(Britten_Kitchener_braucht_Euch\)._1914_\(Nachdruck\),_74_x_50_cm._\(Slg.Nr._552\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:30a_Sammlung_Eybl_Gro%C3%9Fbritannien._Alfred_Leete_(1882%E2%80%931933)_Britons_(Kitchener)_wants_you_(Britten_Kitchener_braucht_Euch)._1914_(Nachdruck),_74_x_50_cm._(Slg.Nr._552).jpg).

A survey of *Cabiria*'s publicity, programmes and reviews in Britain has demonstrated that for it, as with *The Birth of a Nation*, distributors, exhibitors and reviewers attempted to reshape the meaning of a foreign epic better to suit the wartime context of its release. Giorgio Bertellini has written of the heritage value and nationalistic meaning of *Cabiria* for the Italian diaspora in the United States, and Julie Allen of the film as a potential echo of triumphal narratives of British imperial expansion for some audiences in Australasia (Bertellini 2006: 179; Allen 2022: 170–83). This story of the film's unusual travels around Britain, and its changing perception across 1915 and 1916 as a triumph of artistry, as a message by Italy of commitment to war on the side of the Allies, as an opportunity for British cinemas to fundraise in support of that Italian commitment and as, perhaps more mundanely, a lesson in ancient history helps reveal quite how complex and multifaceted *Cabiria* is as a cultural object. The Italian film clearly is made to promote different meanings to its audiences in different transnational contexts of exhibition.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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