‘Socko Shakespeare, seven stars, boffo b.o.’, *Variety* enthused when MGM released Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar*, while the *New York Herald Tribune* proclaimed that ‘the emotional power and sheer excitement of the movie’ proved ‘that William Shakespeare lived under the wrong Elizabeth and might have had two swimming pools in Beverly Hills instead of toiling for ha’pennies at the Globe Theater’.1 In studio publicity, trade papers, newspaper reviews, magazine and journal articles, and educational materials, the film was described and accepted as a faithful and mostly pleasing adaptation of Shakespearean drama to the Hollywood screen.2 And as *Variety* had accurately predicted, it went on to achieve four Oscar nominations, one award for art direction and set decoration (black and white), high grosses, a hit soundtrack album, and several subsequent revivals.3

With the content more or less given, contemporary discussion focussed closely on how the verbal had been visualised, on how theatre had been turned into cinema – in short, on the film’s style. It is with contemporary and subsequent readings of the film’s style that this article is concerned, where, following David Bordwell, style is taken to mean ‘a film’s systematic and significant use of techniques of the medium’.4 But whereas Bordwell analyses film style directly in terms of an aesthetic history he considers to be distinct from the history of the film industry, its technology, or a film’s relation to society, I explore interpretations of one film’s style that are heavily invested with socio-political meaning. If, in Bordwell’s organic metaphor, style is the flesh of film, these readings of style explicitly dress that flesh in socio-political clothing.5 This analysis of *Julius Caesar*, then, is not another contribution to debates about adaptation, theatre on film, or Shakespeare on screen, but about the politics of film style.

**Discourses of film style**

Close analysis of film style is not the exclusive preserve of historians of cinema. Throughout 1953, the year in which *Julius Caesar* was released, many of those associated with its production put their names to articles concerned with the detail of their specialist contribution to the filming of Shakespeare. These included the producer John Houseman in *Films In Review, Sight & Sound* and *The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television*; the technical adviser Pier Maria Pasinetti also in *The Quarterly*; the composer Miklós Rózsa in *Film Music*; the set designer Edward Carfagno in *The Magazine of the Society of Motion Picture Art Directors*; and the actor Sir John Gielgud in a manual designed for schools, illustrated with stills from the film, about *Julius Caesar* and the life of its playwright. Many of their comments were also circulated in studio publicity which was then reproduced and discussed in newspaper and magazine articles about the film throughout its long distribution period that lasted far into spring 1954.6 Such discussion of the film’s distinctive style also continued to be replicated long after 1953, appearing in textbooks of the later 1950s designed to educate American high school students in the appreciation of ‘photoplays’, accompanying the film’s reissue in the 1960s, reappearing in foreign language journals in the 1960s and 70s, and in biographies and autobiographies of the film’s makers well into the 1980s and beyond.7

These readings of MGM’s *Julius Caesar* understood its style not only in terms of the relation (or distinction) between stage plays and photoplays, between Shakespeare staged and screened, but also in terms of the respective histories of the film’s director, studio and, most significantly, its producer. Mankiewicz was...
commonly accepted as a brilliantly gifted director of dialogue, as a playwright of the movies, and as an advocate not of filmed theatre but of film as a mode of theatre. Following that directorial proclivity, his *Julius Caesar* was observed to be relatively bardolatrous, text-bound and theatrical. Early press reports also noted the relation between this effort at cinematic adaptation and the previously unsuccessful attempts by major Hollywood studios to screen Shakespeare, including MGM’s own *Romeo and Juliet* that had lost a quarter of a million dollars in 1936. On release, most commentators compared with evident approval the linguistic fidelity and visual conservatism of this new adaptation with the gimmickry of its Hollywood predecessors. MGM’s *Julius Caesar* was also contrasted favourably with the revived genre of spectacular ancient world epics to which the studio had recently contributed its own *Quo Vadis* (1951). Although the screened Shakespeare had borrowed some sets and costumes from the Neronian epic, and was premiered at the Booth Theater in New York’s Broadway, blown up to widescreen format with stereophonic sound, reviewers regularly drew attention to its modest budget, and the relative absence of spectacle, pageantry, and other visual or aural tricks commonly associated with big-budget Roman epics.

But, above all, journalists drew attention to the previous involvement of the producer John Houseman in the modern dress, anti-fascist *Julius Caesar* of 1937, famously directed on the New York stage by Orson Welles as a warning about the current rise of dictatorships in Europe, the inadequacy of liberalism to face it, and the enthusiasm of the mob for autocratic rule. Over and over, the press (following the studio’s lead) stressed the topicality of the film’s rendition of Shakespeare through the biography and the words of Houseman. A synopsis of the film released by MGM on 2 February 1953 was prefaced by the following declaration:

One of Shakespeare’s most highly dramatic, universally popular and widely-quoted works, *Julius Caesar* is also his most topical play. It deals with realities of which present generations throughout the world are well, and sadly, aware – the jealous lust for power which breeds dictatorship and erupts in political violence; the twin tyrannies of autocratic government and mob rule, and the intense human conflict of those caught between such opposing forces. Letting present-day connotations of this great drama speak for themselves, in terms of recent and contemporary world events, M-G-M brings Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* to the screen in its traditional and classic form.

An MGM press book addressed to managers of cinemas repeated this statement and referred back to Houseman’s involvement in the modern dress *Julius Caesar* in order to stress that topicality ought to be a central strategy by which to sell the film to the general moviegoer (as opposed to special interest groups like school or university students). In an early report on the shooting of the film and in anticipation of the methods of most subsequent reviews, the *New York Times* (21 September 1952) similarly cited Houseman’s involvement with the famous modern dress *Julius Caesar* and quoted a slightly adapted version of the above statement as the words of the producer himself. Supplied with such material, it is no surprise that for many reviewers the dominant influence on MGM’s ‘topical’ interpretation of the Shakespearean play was the Houseman-Welles connection and that they were driven to read out of the film’s style a similar, anti-fascist political vision.

Thus interpreting the 1953 *Julius Caesar* in the light of the histories of its director, studio and producer, contemporary critics were highly attentive to those small and subtle techniques of the film they considered more cinematic than theatrical, and motivated to read those techniques politically. According to the *Saturday Review*, MGM’s new *Julius Caesar* firmly adapts the play, without the least sense of strain, into its motion-picture mold and, in the doing, gives it a gleaming new appearance. The marvelous poetry, oratory, and rhetoric of the play are apparent, almost as though heard for the first time: there are moments of shock and excitement that the contemporary drama never seems able to
reach: one continually sees in it parallels to contemporary history, and prophetic lessons and warnings. That John Houseman, the producer, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, the director, and as accomplished a cast as one could wish could bring this pristine freshness and impact to a play three-and-a-half centuries old is the major accomplishment of the production. I will even go out on a limb and say that it seems to me to belong in the front rank of the great motion pictures.14

It is to the specifics of this intersection between the ‘motion-picture mold’ and ‘contemporary history’, between film style and politics, that I now turn.

The colour and props of fascism

Crucial to the creation of contemporary political meaning out of the cinematic style of Julius Caesar (1953) was its use of monochrome. In an era of Technicolor superspectacles (such as MGM’s Quo Vadis two years earlier) and with the dawn of widescreen (initiated that same year by Twentieth-Century Fox’s The Robe), reviewers greeted with approval the ‘starkly appropriate blacks and whites and grays’ of Joseph Ruttenberg’s photography (Newsweek). A most satisfactory explanation for this choice was provided by the producer John Houseman, whose words of justification were endlessly recycled in studio publicity, press interviews, magazine and journal articles, and, ultimately, in his autobiographies. Perhaps the fullest version of his justification appeared in Films In Review, where he associated colour with ‘irrelevant and spectacular show’, shimmer and grandeur, monochrome with tragedy, intensity, simplicity and, most importantly of all, political analogy:15

Julius Caesar, when effectually performed before modern audiences, enjoys one clear advantage over most classic plays: the almost automatic emotion which this drama of political strife engenders in audiences, all of whom, in their time, directly or indirectly, by remote or immediate experience, have witnessed and suffered from analogous evils of political strife, demagoguery and mass violence. It was for us to encourage this empathy.

While never deliberately exploiting the historic parallels, there were certain emotional patterns arising from political events of the immediate past that we were prepared to evoke – Hitler, Mussolini and Ciano at the Brenner Pass; the assemblage at Munich; Stalin and Ribbentrop signing the Pact: and similar smiling conference-table friendships that soon ripened into violence and death. Also Hitler at Nuremberg and Compiegne and later in the Berlin rubble; Mussolini on his balcony with that same docile mob massed below which later watched him hanging by his feet, dead. These sights are as much a part of our contemporary consciousness – in the black and white of newsreel and TV screens – as, to Elizabethan audiences, were the personal and political conflicts and tragedies of Essex, Bacon, Leicester and the Cecils.16

For Houseman, as for subsequent commentators, black and white photography gave to Julius Caesar the texture of newsreel or documentary footage on the growth and the collapse of recent dictatorships. And to sustain the feel of a news story, MGM published a mock newspaper called the Daily Chariot with a still of Louis Calhern as the mortally wounded Roman leader, and a banner headline for 16 March 44: ‘CAESAR SLAIN! Brutus, Cassius Head Plot In Stabbing of Dictator; Mobs Loot City, Many Die’. But if, through its monochrome photography, the film recalled the colour of fascism most familiar to American audiences and triggered memories of wartime regimes, through the details of its mise-en-scène, it also drew attention to some of the specific props of fascism’s public spectacles: namely their Roman iconography and their Caesarism.

First performed in 1599 in Elizabethan costume and with Elizabethan props (such as Brutus’ notoriously anachronistic book), Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar reverberated with the rhetoric of the period’s heated debates about the morality of rebellion and tyrannicide, and rehearsed the growth of powers of the English parliament, its challenge to royal absolutism, and the revolution that would ensue.17 In the play’s performance history, costume and mise-en-scène have always figured significantly in the process of
transforming Shakespearean tragedy into political drama more suited to new contexts of production. In relation to MGM’s Julius Caesar, the technical adviser Pier Maria Pasinetti announced his justification for the use of Roman costumes and stylised, Italianate sets (Figs. 1–3), and reviewers subsequently appraised and evaluated their contribution to the political atmosphere of the film, all in the most general terms such as the dramatic value of long, steep flights of steps that can stage movements of power. Yet the Roman costumes and Italianate sets effectively distance the film from the play’s specific historical moment, and manage to evoke the spectacle of fascism, without repeating the more explicit and, according to Pasinetti, ‘strange and avant-garde’ tactics of modern dress and staging (such as Welles’ pin-stripe suits and military black shirts, the ‘Nuremberg’ columns of light, and the Caesar cast for his physical resemblance to Mussolini). For if MGM had left ‘the modern parallels of this great, timeless drama to speak for themselves’ (as the head of production declared in the preview programme), it was because such parallels were already embedded in the film’s costumes and mise-en-scène as well as its colour.

While reviewers noted with admiration the spacious and undecorated sets designed by Cedric Gibbons and Edward Carfagno, the technical adviser (whose expertise lay, he insisted, not in ancient history or archaeology but in his Italian origin and education) was often cited as explaining such sets in terms of an overall agenda to reconstruct ancient Rome as a living, Italian city. And an anecdote attributed to Houseman supplied evidence of the strategy’s success: on visiting the sets of Julius Caesar at the MGM lot in Los Angeles, the Italian director Vittorio de Sica supposedly declared that its Roman streets looked as if they had been copied straight from present-day Ferrara. Such an agenda links the film’s mise-en-scène most closely to the Roman spectacle that sustained fascist Italy. Fascism (most of all in Italy, and to a lesser degree in Germany) was noted for its dependence on public, political theatre and, in particular, on the symbolic use of ancient Rome as part of its aesthetics of power. While in Germany fascism was objectified in monumental Roman-style architecture around which were conducted an array of national rites and festivals, in Italy ancient Rome (along with its eagles, fasces, salutes and triumphal processions) had been appropriated as fascism’s central political vision, its official symbolic discourse, and its mode of governance. From the March on Rome in 1922 onwards, Italian fascism had been staged as spectacular Roman theatre with Mussolini playing the part of Caesar. His public persona was deliberately shaped as that of another general who had crossed his own Rubicon to uproot a rotten republic and establish a new dictatorial order for the benefit of the people and, to confirm this identity with Julius Caesar, the Duce instituted a public ritual whereby spring flowers were placed at the feet of statues of Caesar on every Ides of March. So successful was this historical twinning, that Mussolini was even labelled the ‘new’ or ‘modern’ Caesar in the voice-overs of Hearst Movietone newsreels (which were distributed throughout cinemas in the United States) until his fall in 1943, at which point he was reduced to a mere ham actor or ‘sawdust Caesar’ who had strutted over an empire made only of pasteboard.

Thus MGM’s Julius Caesar utilised not just the black and white of contemporary historical consciousness of fascism, but also (as later critics have noted) specific memories of the ancient Roman rituals which the Italian and German regimes had variously borrowed and restaged. The eagles which litter the film can symbolise simultaneously Roman dictatorial and imperial power and its appropriation and widespread display as part of fascist ideology: from the eagle banner which first fills the screen and over which the film’s title and credits appear, through the multiple eagles reproduced on the backs of Caesar’s military escort (Fig. 1), and the eagle embroidered on the tunic of a slave and decorating the backrest of a chair in Caesar’s villa, to the eagle-shaped clasp on the cloak Caesar wears to the senate on the Ides of March. The dictator’s initial procession to the stadium...
where he will reject the crown of kingship (Fig. 1) recollects Italian military parades that were regularly overseen by Mussolini as they led down a specially constructed ‘avenue of empire’ to the Colosseum. A high-angled camera often takes in the vertical pattern of the ceremonial standards held high by Caesar’s imperial guards in a manner that replicates sequences of Leni Riefenstahl’s internationally distributed documentary film on the Nazi party rally of 1934, *Triumph of the Will*, while the cheers of ‘Hail Caesar!’ raised by the crowds to greet the dictator’s arrival at the stadium echo the ‘Sieg Heil’ that greeted Hitler on the soundtrack to footage of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games (as in Riefenstahl’s own *Olympiad*). The ubiquity of Calhern’s image as Caesar, such as the portrait bust that overshadows Cassius’ seduction of Brutus into the conspiracy, recalls the proliferation of images of Mussolini and Caesar that colonized the lives of Italians under the regime. While, as Houseman himself noted in his...
autobiographies, the mob scenes in the forum (Figs. 2 and 3) were deliberately staged to evoke memories of both the Führer and the Duce ranting to wildly cheering crowds, and to demonstrate the susceptibility of people past and present to demagoguery. The readability of such scenes as fascist is aided by their overlap with a common filmic strategy of post-war Hollywood epics set in ancient Rome. Even in shimmering Technicolor, MGM’s own Quo Vadis (1951) had presented ancient Rome and its emperor Nero as analogous to modern Europe and its dictatorships, and the virtuous resistance of the early Christians as a parallel for the god-fearing heroism of America’s soldiers during the Second World War.

Fascism in close-up and to music

Thus the readability of Julius Caesar’s film style as an evocation of fascism lies in the cultural competence of its makers, the studio, reviewers and spectators to associate its documentary monochromes and classical props with wartime dictatorships, and to read such an association into as well as out of the film’s style. Furthermore, while black and white photography, Roman costumes, and Italianate sets worked to establish for Julius Caesar a political association with fascism, the film’s camework and score also helped provide it with an anti-fascist narrative drive. In his study of film style, David Bordwell observes simply that close ups (along with landscape shots and unusual camera angles) are uniquely filmic devices. But one of the many recent analysts of Shakespeare on screen has recognised additionally that close ups constitute a spatial field unique to cinema which, when deployed, can supply new sociopolitical meanings for Elizabethan theatre transposed onto film. When MGM’s Julius Caesar was released, reviewers took note of both its subtle play with close ups and their role in the reconstruction of character and motivation: for the Motion Picture Herald, ‘it would be hard to point to a film where the fluidity of the camera with its closeups and quick movements does more to make a writer’s words understandable’; while, according to the New York Herald Tribune, Mankiewicz’s Caesar ‘fascinates the eye with enormous emotional confidences betrayed in close-ups of the ancient Roman heroes’. In particular, led by the pronouncements of the producer Houseman himself, attention was everywhere drawn to the inventive manipulation of the camera between speaker and mob that takes place over the bloody corpse of Caesar in the crucial Forum sequence, and to the role of camera movement in rendering such interaction ‘more closely observed and more dramatic than on stage’.

Here, in the Forum sequence, the camera clearly works to construct an anti-fascist message by fixing the character of Mark Antony (played by Marlon Brando) as an unscrupulous demagogue. As with earlier sequences involving the dictator Caesar, the camera often looks down at the mob from the point of view of his successor positioned high, or up at him from the point of view of the mob below, suggesting through his spatial dominance the orator’s power – that is, the triumph of the fascist will (Fig. 2). Under Mankiewicz’s direction, the film also cuts intimately ‘from Marlon Brando, looking like a grieving young eagle, to the mirror-faces of the rabble reflecting each flash of indignation in Mark Antony’s cleverly worded plea for vengeance’ (New York Herald Tribune). Most pointedly of all, at two moments in his rousing speech for retaliation against the assassins of Caesar, the camera focuses on Antony’s face when his back is turned away from the crowd of Roman citizens and thus reveals his expression exclusively to the film’s spectators. In the first case, the camera discloses his calculating look when Antony has momentarily paused in his funeral oration as if overwhelmed with grief. In the second, and closing the long Forum sequence, the camera fills the screen with the departing Antony’s sardonic smile as, behind and below him, tiny citizens begin to loot and wreck the city. Figure 3 catches the moment immediately preceding that concluding close up and, with it, the transformation of Rome’s citizens into the gullible victims of a cunning demagogue. This use of close up to characterize
Antony as motivated by a calculating desire to succeed Caesar in the role of dictator at Rome is continued later in the film with his victorious smirk as he witnesses from a safe distance the defeat of his enemies in battle and, in the film’s final moments, with ‘his half-triumphant, half-admiring stare diagonally down the screen at the dead face of a Brutus who can no longer stare back’ (New York Herald Tribune).28

The accompanying music – a ‘potent mood factor’ according to the Hollywood Reporter – was deliberately designed to match and reinforce
this visual characterization of Antony. According to an article by the composer Miklós Rózsa, published at the time of the film’s release and including excerpts of his score, the film constitutes ‘a universal drama, about the eternal problems of men and the most timely problems about the fate of dictators’, while Caesar and Mark Antony represent ‘the ruthless, ambition filled, arrogant, Roman imperialists; Brutus, the honest straight-forward man who loves Caesar but loves his country better’.29 Brutus’ tragic, brooding, musing, sighing musical theme (scored for strings only) opens and closes the film but is regularly interrupted or counterpointed by a stern, authoritarian, martial theme (scored for brass, woodwind and percussion instruments) which serves as the theme of first Caesar and then his political heir, Antony.30

Intertextuality and totalitarianism

From its inception, MGM’s Julius Caesar was represented by its makers as evoking black and white memories of wartime dictatorships in Italy, Germany, and Russia. In the preview programme, the head of production (Dore Schary) introduced the film in the following terms:

An audience which has witnessed the atrocities committed by modern police states in Germany, Italy and Russia finds nothing obscure about the playwright’s observation that ‘The abuse of greatness is when it disjoins remorse from power’. Shakespeare’s lines on Roman tyranny, political ambition and the corruption bred by absolute power ring familiarly true today. They are as topical as yesterday’s headlines.

But ‘yesterday’s headlines’ had largely been concerned neither with Mussolini nor Hitler, but with Stalin – rumours of his physical decline and of conspiracies against him, propositions that he be assassinated, and in March 1953 announcements of his death. For some commentators, therefore, Julius Caesar formed an intertext with the most recent of political events and its style evoked a commentary not so much on wartime fascism as on present-day totalitarianism.33 Thus Life carried on its cover a photograph of Brando as Mark Antony and within the magazine, literally forming an intertext with articles on ‘Stalin’s secret’, captions underneath stills from the film identified Caesar and Antony in the terminology of anti-communism as ‘dictator and disciple’, the conspirators as ‘patriots’.34 More explicitly, by the time of the film’s provincial distribution in December, the Cleveland Press was declaring ‘Today’s world-wide struggle between the free nations and communism bears a striking resemblance to the events of 44 B.C., when Julius Caesar reigned over the Roman empire’.35 Similarly, towards the end of the film’s distribution in spring 1954, the organisation Educational Consultants on Entertainment Films (ECEF) published a guide to the film’s value for classroom discussion. After viewing Julius Caesar, it suggested, ‘Let the student review the
challenge in the world today: democracy and totalitarianism, Iron curtain or freedom?36

This latter use of the film as an education in contemporary politics borrows from a long tradition in the United States of performing and teaching _Julius Caesar_ as Shakespeare’s most American play. The American revolution had been troped as a struggle by the citizenry of a new Roman republic against Britain’s tyrannical Roman empire and, from the time of the Founding Fathers, the new nation had been shaped to match the contours of that ancient
republicanism – from its mixed constitution to the Virgilian motto on its currency, from the formation of its Senate to the urban design of its capital city. Against the background of this invented connection with ancient Rome, it was a relatively simple and useful strategy to interpret Shakespeare’s Brutus as a version of the American patriot who fights for freedom from domination by the English king’s Caesar. Thus the Elizabethan tragedy had for centuries been taught in America’s schools and performed in its theatres as a call to arms against tyranny. But if America had once modelled itself on the Roman republic against Britain’s Roman empire, by the early 1950s it was no longer an urgent necessity to look exclusively beyond its own borders for an oppressive Caesar. As both Mankiewicz and Houseman appeared discreetly to appreciate, and as the broadcaster Edward Murrow was eventually to proclaim on national television, now the heroism of a Brutus might equally be needed against an enemy within.

Long before fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the United States had modelled itself on conveniently selected aspects of ancient Roman history, so the classical props of MGM’s *Julius Caesar* could recall modern-day America as well as European dictatorships. Washington too was littered with the eagles and fasces that adorned such neo-classical monuments as the Lincoln Memorial. As a reviewer in *The Twentieth Century* observed of the Forum sets, ‘the steep stone steps of the Capitol might indeed have been in Washington’. Two other aspects of the film’s style provoked commentators to thoughts of American history and society. Shot on location in Bronson Canyon, a granite quarry in the vicinity of the Hollywood Bowl, the battle on the plains of Philippi between the murderers and the avengers of Caesar was transformed into ‘an ambush in a gorge, staged like a skirmish between Apaches and United States Cavalry in a Western’ while the casting of Louis Calhern as Caesar led critics from his star persona as a smooth criminal gangleader, a paternalistic mobster, to interpretations of *Julius Caesar* as ‘a sort of gangster picture with an ancient (44 B.C.) Roman setting’. Moreover, the studio’s production and distribution of a mock tabloid – the *Daily Chariot* – not only supported the documentary colouring of the film but also lent it the familiarity of events unfolding in an American capital city. The ‘newspaper’ not only reported the death of the dictator in the ‘Capitol Rotunda’, at the hands of various senators, as witnessed by numerous Capitol employees, and published an editorial asking where were the police when the rioting began, but also included details of the various attempts by the journalist ‘Vittoria Sobbicus’ to obtain the feminine angle through exclusives extracted from the widow and the chief assassin’s wife. Perhaps somewhat ill-advisedly, an MGM press book dated 1954 even suggested as a publicity stunt that newsboys should be hired to distribute the tabloid around town while attracting attention with cries of ‘Assassination in the Senate!’.

If aspects of the film’s style led contemporary commentators to think generally of American society, cautious pronouncements by the its director and producer, combined with knowledge of their liberal credentials and experiences, provide further hints on how to read it more immediately and specifically as a commentary on an urgent crisis in America’s political scene – as an assault on the fascism or totalitarianism that lay within. Already by war’s end, America had inherited the political problems associated with European imperialism, and fascism had become identified by the liberal left not only with Italy and Germany but also with the threat to American democratic values posed by the growth of powers of both the military and the anti-communist right. According to a number of film critics, early on in the production of *Julius Caesar* Mankiewicz indicated explicitly an immediate political analogy for his Brutus in the presidential elections of 1952 when, despite the preceding twenty years of Democratic rule, the principled liberal Adlai Stevenson was defeated by the overwhelming popularity of the crowd-pleasing, charismatic general Dwight Eisenhower. Similarly, Houseman wrote that it is Brutus we should be rooting for because he is ‘a man of reason in a world of violence, he makes us think
of that tragic figure of our times, the liberal man, torn bet his principles and the need to vindicate them with bloodshed. Although this latter description appears to hark back to the characterization of Brutus in the Houseman-Welles stage production of 1937 rather than to any update of it for the specific domestic circumstances of 1953, critics have connected the screen Brutus (played by James Mason) with the liberal Democrat biographies of the film’s producer and director and read him as constructed in their own image. They note that...
during the red-scare era in America, when the demagogue Senator Joseph McCarthy was leading the drive to search for and punish any Americans expressing leftwing sympathies, Houseman was frequently accused of being a communist or fellow-traveller by congressional witch hunters, while Mankiewicz suffered similar accusations from fellow film directors such as the rightwing Cecil B. DeMille. In these biographical readings of *Julius Caesar*, the producer and director styled Caesar as dictatorial, Antony as demagogic, and gentle Brutus as an ideal version of themselves. Frequently shot against the looming shadows cast by massive Caesarean statuary or the tangled branches of barren trees (Fig. 4), Brutus is displayed as a man of principle whose pure ideals are sullied by dirty politics. Caught in a web of fruitless political reasoning, he finds himself ultimately subjected to abuse and unjust accusations of treason.46

Significantly, however, no review that I have found of *Julius Caesar* suggests a reading of the film’s style as a subtle attack on McCarthyism until the beginning of the year 1954, when it had already been in distribution for some seven months.47 Even then reviews mention no specific names. After seeing the film in January, a Chicago journalist declared that

> No textbook can impress the mind with the cynicism of a politician bent on inflaming the populace as the actual sight of such a man in action . . . Every generation has its share of such men. So has the present one. They pretend love of the people and profess their zeal for public service. But they are bent on personal advancement and power. They arouse the crowd to hysteria today as well as in Shakespeare’s time, by such similar tricks of the demagogue that the play “Julius Caesar” could seem as contemporary in spots as a TV program.48

More succinctly (though also more evasively), the *Washington Post* suggested “Whether you concentrate on the comedies or the intrigues of political Washington, you will find this *Julius Caesar* stirring, exciting and provocative”.49 As the Chicago newspaper hints, this shift towards the domestic in political readings of the film’s style can best be understood in terms of its relation to American television documentaries, and to two in particular which were broadcast almost exactly a year apart on 8 March 1953 and 9 March 1954 (respectively three months before the release of MGM’s *Julius Caesar* and towards the end of its run), and in both of which Caesar figures.

*The Assassination of Julius Caesar* was broadcast at 6.30 pm on Sunday 8 March 1953 as part of a CBS network TV series directed by Sidney Lumet and produced by Charles W. Russell called *You Are There*. Even more overtly than the film which would follow shortly, this half-hour live ‘docudrama’ was designed to present Roman history as a breaking news story. It began in the studio, with the newsreader Walter Cronkite (already famous as anchor for the CBS broadcasts of the political conventions of the preceding year) reporting

> March 15th the 710th year after the founding of the city of Rome. And in Rome today an extraordinary political event is scheduled to take place here in the centre of the world’s economic and political power – the oldest living Republic is about to vote itself out of existence and become a monarchy.

Whether such an event will in fact take place depends, according to Cronkite, on the influence of the army, the courage of individual senators, the ambition of Caesar, and the attitude of Rome’s populace. The scene then shifts to various locations in ancient Rome, where other correspondents from the CBS news division undertake on the spot interviews with Cassius in the senate chamber and Calpurnia in Caesar’s palace. As befits the title of the series, its style plunges the American viewer into the dramatization of history: interviewees speak in close up directly to camera, the interviewers are never seen, and the camera spies on the assassination as if the television audience have themselves become witnesses to the events. In the studio-based epilogue that follows, Cronkite sums up: “What sort of a day have we had? A day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our times. And you were there!” Roman history is relayed into the homes of modern-day America and the American television audience is brought right into Roman
history. In addition to the programme’s style, the evident identity between past and present political terminology helps establish a domestic topicality for the news that is being broken: senators in a republic are overreaching their powers, motions are being put forward in the chamber to suspend constitutional rights. As with MGM’s *Julius Caesar*, however, no explicit attack on McCarthyism takes place. It is the audience who, in the privacy of their own homes, have to take responsibility for establishing the historical analogy (and making the implicit criticism). Similarly, only retrospective analysis of the context in which the television series was produced and of the biographies of its makers brings its political agenda completely out into the open. All three of the chief scriptwriters for the series were on the blacklist and were therefore writing under pseudonyms. One subsequently declared that the series was probably the only place where any guerrilla warfare was conducted against McCarthy in a public medium, since its historical themes were generally selected for their bearing on the terrors he perpetrated – a serial historiography of losses of civil liberties and intellectual freedoms, investigations, witchhunts, trials, recantations, and executions.50

MGM’s *Julius Caesar*, however, only began to be understood explicitly as an assault on McCarthy towards the end of the film’s run when a celebrated television documentary was broadcast attacking McCarthy openly for being America’s modern-day Caesar. At 10.30pm on 9 March 1954, the same network CBS broadcast a ‘Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy’ in its half-hour weekly documentary series *See it Now*. Fronted by Edward R. Murrow, who had been made famous by his wartime radio reports from Europe, the telecast painted McCarthy as a shallow demagogue through documentary footage of his own public statements and a catalogue of increasingly scathing criticisms made about him by other established figures, interspersed with Murrow’s own remarks. The reporter observes that in 1952 Eisenhower had promised that only conventional executive powers and trial by jury would be deployed in the fight against domestic communism, but that McCarthy had resorted to terrorizing Americans. He also notes that even Truman, in an article in the *New York Times* of 17 November 1953, had now defined McCarthyism as ‘the rise to power of a demagogue’. Becoming more adversarial in the crucial conclusion (and perhaps borrowing from the strategies of the film still on release), Murrow turns a quotation that McCarthy had appropriated from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* against him to ask ‘and upon what meat does Senator McCarthy feed?’. The answer, he states, is a diet of distortion and misuse of office. Finally Murrow looks straight to camera and boldly declares ‘We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men . . . . Cassius was right: “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves”. Good night and good luck.’51 Three days later, this extra-cinematic event was interlinked with the experience of seeing *Julius Caesar* on screen by an Oklahoma reviewer.52 On the basis of her reading of the relation between the film and the television documentary, she takes Murrow to mean that McCarthy is a Caesar whom the American people have themselves made and must therefore unmake: ‘he must have meant to imply that we have only ourselves to blame for the fears and the apathy by which freedoms are lost and dictators have their way’. She expresses pleasure that the fear of McCarthy has now been shaken off by most commentators and newspapers and looks forward to what will follow. What did in fact follow after the documentary had been broadcast in thirty-six cities across the United States, was a flood of enthusiastic responses and, towards the end of that year, McCarthy was formally censured for working against the traditions of the Senate. The ‘dictator’ had finally been dethroned.

Thus the complex style of MGM’s *Julius Caesar* – its monochrome evocations of both wartime newsreels and domestic television documentaries, the intertextuality of its mise-en-scène with the props of American republicanism as well as European dictatorships – enabled its political topicality to shift and change even
during the course of its first run.\(^5\) However, not only is the political meaning generated by the film’s style subject to change, it is also contradictory. Political readings of film style can change according to that style’s changing intertexts, but at any given moment they can also be contradictory because the constituent parts of a film’s style do not necessarily build up to a politically coherent whole.

**The political contradictions of casting**

Apart from general considerations of style in transforming staged into screened Shakespeare, of all the stylistic features of *Julius Caesar* (1953) casting and performance were the overriding concern in studio publicity, trade reports and press comments. Prior to the film’s release, newspapers and magazines speculated wildly on how Marlon Brando was going to match up to the daunting role of Mark Antony. A *New York Times* reporter got on to the closed set with the express purpose of inquiring how Brando’s performance was coming along,\(^5\) while *This Week* claimed that, as far as the studio was concerned, the success or failure of its production rested almost entirely on Brando’s delivery of the key Forum speech. On the film’s release, *Cue Magazine* (n.d.) recalled how the news of this unusual casting had been met:

*Movie fans from the Bronx to Bangkok hooted derisively. What, their brawny boy, mouthing Shakespearean iambic pentameters! Critics expressed themselves as horrified at the prospect of “Streetcar’s” Stanley Kowalski desecrating the King’s English with his garbled growls. Cinemonde in Paris headlined the news with the French equivalent of ‘Brando learns English to Play Shakespeare!’ And columnists cracked that critics would need a Brando-Into-English dictionary if they expected to cover ‘Julius Caesar’.*

The prospect of a loutish reading of ‘Friends, Romans, countrymen’ even entered into the routines of comedians in nightclubs and on national television.\(^5\)

Largely on the basis of his performance as Stanley Kowalski on stage and screen, Brando’s star persona at the time embodied a virile American masculinity that was reinforced when set against the effete British intellectualism American spectators discerned in the performances of James Mason as Brutus and John Gielgud as Cassius.\(^6\) Shakespearean dialogue in the Forum scene conveniently sustains this opposition even further as Antony/Brando reflects that he is ‘no orator’ like Brutus/Mason, but only ‘a plain blunt man’ (Act 3.2.210–11). Consequently, on the release of *Julius Caesar* the verdict of American critics on Brando’s performance was in general highly enthusiastic. *Variety* declared that ‘He turns in the performance of his career. His interpretation of the famous funeral oration will be a conversation piece.’\(^5\) The entire speech takes on a new light as voiced by Brando.’ And *Boxoffice* magazine noticed that ‘Gone is the nasal, word-slurring reading of lines which characterized many of his preceding film roles – to be replaced by a forceful, crisp, incisive performance that will crystallize the large fan following he has already established, and will win for him a legion of new and more discriminating admirers.’\(^5\)

Casting, accents, and acting style here all worked against the tradition that had made Brutus an American hero. And, as Houseman himself noted scornfully in one of his autobiographies, the casting of Brando as Antony also effectively reversed the structure of the *Julius Caesar* staged by Welles: ‘Now it was Mark Antony they were rooting for and the twelve hundred cheering bit players and extras massed on MGM’s Stage 25 were merely anticipating the empathy of future audiences’.\(^5\)

The studio furthered this dramatic political reversal when it took commercial advantage of Brando’s immense popularity and acting success to upgrade his performance into that of the star role. One of their posters used the current vocabulary of communist conspiracy to label James Mason’s Brutus a ‘gallant warrior seduced to a traitor’s cause’, John Gielgud’s Cassius a ‘wicked conspirator in infamy’, and Louis Calhern’s Caesar a ‘mighty conqueror, victim of assassins’. Marlon Brando’s Antony achieves top billing as ‘the firebrand who set Rome aflame’.\(^5\)
This billing procedure effectively transformed the film into an anti-communist (rather than an anti-McCarthy) tract and clearly touched a chord with some reviewers. Hollis Alpert expressed great admiration for the performance of Brando as Antony while finding John Gielgud’s Cassius the most topical performance of all:1 ‘I kept seeing in him (perhaps fancifully) the prototype of the Marxian intellectual. And it is Cassius, after all, who shows most knowledge of the revolutionist’s handbook.’42

Conclusion
My purpose has been to demonstrate, through the case of Julius Caesar, how style creates political meaning for a film. ‘Classic’ Hollywood film style does not necessarily close down the political ambivalence of the literary works which it projects on screen; indeed recognition of its complexity can generate equal ambivalences and even contradictions.6 Nor is the readability of film style in political terms self-contained. The discourse of film style intersects with other discourses: in this case, for example, with Romanitas and with the rhetorical function of ancient Rome in the rituals of Italian (and German) fascism and of American republicanism with the history of Shakespearean performance in America, and even with the language of televisual anti-McCarthyism. The process of reading a film’s style thus deserves scrutiny because it can help disclose the subtle and fluid relation between a film’s aesthetic and political textures.

Notes
1 Variety, 3 June 1953. The Herald Tribune cutting is not dated, but presumably contemporary.
2 Cp. This Week (1 March 1953); Time (1 June 1953); Motion Picture Herald (6 June 1953); The Twentieth Century 154.922 (1953): 469; The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television 8.2 (1953): 125.
5 Bordwell: 8.
6 The book Julius Caesar and the Life of William Shakespeare, ed. Robert Harding, can be found in the British Film Institute Library, London. I have collated other roughly contemporary discussions of the film from the clippings and production files of the Margaret Herrick Library, the USC Cinema–Television Library (inc. its MGM Special Collection), and the UCLA John Houseman Special Collection (B16), all in Los Angeles; the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington; the Museum of Modern Art and the Performing Arts Library, New York.
10 Time, 1 June 1953.
11 Variety, 3 June 1953; New York Herald Tribune n.d.
12 For which see, recently, Maria Wyke, ‘Sawdust Caesar: Mussolini, Julius Caesar, and the drama of dictatorship’, in Maria Wyke and Michael Biddiss (eds.), Uses and Abuses of Antiquity, Peter Lang, 1999: 176–9.
14 Saturday Review, 6 June 1953.
15 Films In Review 4.4, April 1953.
17 For interpretations of the play in terms of Elizabethan politics, see e.g. The Twentieth Century 154.922 (1953): 472–3; Robert S. Miola, ‘Julius Caesar and the Tyrannicide Debate’, Renaissance Quarterly 38.2 (1985); Rebecca W. Bushnell, Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater...


19 Pasinetti’s justifications of the mise-en-scène appear in The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television 8.2 (1953): 131–8 and are picked up on in, for example, Hollywood Citizen-News (5 January 1953).


21 See, for example, George L. Mosse, The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich, Howard Fertig, 1975; Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, David Elliott and lain Boyd Whyte (eds.), Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators 1930–45, Hayward Gallery, 1995; Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy, University of California Press, 1997; Wyke, ‘Sawdust Caesar’.


23 For this strategy, see Maria Wyke, Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History, Routledge, 1997 and Winkler, ‘The Roman Empire’.

24 Bordwell, On the History of Film Style: 33.


26 Motion Picture Herald, 8 June 1953.

27 Houseman, Unfinished Business: 325. Cp., for example, the reviews in Sight and Sound 23.2 (1953) and Films in Review 4.5 (1953) where, in both cases, they follow on immediately from the edition in which Houseman’s comments on the film have been published.


29 Film Music 13.1, Fall, 1953.


32 For the political ambivalence of Shakespeare’s play, see above note 11.

33 See Miller, ‘Julius Caesar in the Cold War’: 96.

34 Life, 20 April 1953.

35 Cleveland Press, 9 December 1953.

36 The guide can be found in the Houseman Special Collections (UCLA) 816, box 119; in a scrapbook of materials the producer collated on Julius Caesar. It is dated only February, but clearly belongs to a period after the film’s release.


38 For Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar in American schools and on the American stage, see Maurice Charney, ‘On Mankiewicz’s Julius Caesar’, The Literary Review 22.4 (1979): 433–4; Ripley, Julius Caesar on Stage; Sinfield, ‘Theaters of War’: 50–2.

39 The Twentieth Century, December 1953.


41 Time, 1 June 1953. Cp. Also Rochester Times-Union (19 March 1954). See further Manvell, Shakespeare and the Film: 87; Geist, Pictures will Talk: 228; Sinyard, Filming Literature: 14.


43 I can trace back this anecdote about Mankiewicz’s analogy no further than Geist, Pictures will Talk: 224. It is then taken up by Sinyard, Filming Literature: 14; Willson: 38; Miller, ‘Julius Caesar in the Cold War’: 96–7.

44 I quote from an article by Houseman entitled ‘Julius Caesar S.P.Q.R. Hollywood – 1953’ which can be found in the MGM collection at the USC Cinema–Television Library, although I have not been able to find evidence of where the article was published.

45 Houseman notes in Run-Through: 318 that reviews of the 1937 play consistently equated the tragedy of Brutus with the fallacy of adopting a liberal position in a violent world.


47 I have examined the production files at the Margaret Herrick library in Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the USC Cinema–Television library special collection on MGM, and the scrapbooks of materials about the film collated by the producer himself and now to be found in UCLA’s special collection on Houseman.


49 Washington Post, 3 February 1954.


51 As with the You are There series, the programme can be viewed at the film and television archives of UCLA. On the programme and the series, see Thomas Rosteck, See it Now Confronts McCarthyism: Television Documentary and the Politics of Representation, University of Alabama Press, 1994; Michael Ranville, To Strike at a King: The Turning Point in the McCarthy Witch-Hunts, Momentum Books, 1997; Miller, ‘Julius Caesar in the Cold War’: 98.

52 Oklahoma City Advertiser, 12 March 1954.

53 While the journalist interprets Murrow in the light of the MGM Julius Caesar, another critic interprets a later screen Brutus in the light of Murrow. According to Manvell, Shakespeare and the Film: 94, in a 1969 film version of Julius Caesar Jason Robards ‘brings to the part the worried intensity of Edward R. Murrow . . . in his famous telecasts exposing Senator McCarthy’.


55 See Geist, Pictures will Talk: 225; Houseman, Front and Center: 388–9; Peter Manso, Brando, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994: 323.

56 Geist: 228; Miller, ‘Julius Caesar in the Cold War’: 98.

57 3 June 1953.

58 Cp., for example, This Week (1 March 1953) and Hollywood Reporter (n.d.).

59 Houseman, Runthrough: 308n. For discussion of this apparent miscasting of Brando, see also François Guérif, Jules Cesar, Lumière du cinéma 3 (1977): 62; The Literary Review 22.4 (1979): 446–53; Geist, Pictures will Talk: 227.

60 On the poster (a copy of which can be seen in the USC Cinema–Television Library), see Lenihan, ‘English Classics’: 48.

61 Saturday Review, 6 June 1953.

62 See further Miller, Julius Caesar in the Cold War: 97–8.

63 On Julius Caesar in particular, contrast Miller: 99 who argues that the open-ended political suggestiveness of the film renders it, overall, apolitical.