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Caligula and the Fight for Artistic Freedom: The Making, Marketing and Impact of the Bob Guccione Film. William Hawes. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2009. P/bk 254 pp. + vi. ISBN 978-0-7864-3986-7. Price £35.50.

Ostensibly a biopic about the decadent Gaius Caesar (also known as Caligula, or "Little Boots," a ruler descended from the line of Augustus and Tiberius Claudius Nero who reigned between 37 and 41 A.D.), the Penthouse production of *Caligula* (1979) slowly acquired the cultural baggage to become so much more. Part historical spectacle and part feature-length adult film, *Caligula* mixes weighty dialog and political intrigues with lavish sequences of graphic sex and violence. Bankrolled by pornographer Bob Guccione and envisioned as a prestigious tie-in to his magazine empire, the film improbably mixed established actors, a celebrity scribe, lavish sets, and an artistically ambitious yet uncooperative director into an unruly final product that exists in several different cuts. The film was savaged by critics upon its initial release, yet it was kept in constant theatrical circulation for several years and found a profitable afterlife on home video and DVD (196; 198). William Hawes' study of this infamous *film maudit* is a bit like the movie itself. At times overlong and unfocused, it is ultimately redeemed through its careful attention to context and its sheer audacity.

The book's first chapter ("Divine Metamorphosis") tracks the film from inception to its cultural afterlife, situating it into a long line of Hollywood attempts at sensationalizing antiquity for modern viewers. While Hawes spends ample space on the big attempts at sexualizing the ancient world — from *Intolerance* (1916) through the BBC television serial *I, Claudius* (1972) — the book is noticeably silent on the most direct cycle of films to prefigure *Caligula.* The sword and sandal obsession of the late 1950s and 1960s, while clearly indebted to a series of popular Hollywood features to tread the same ground, nonetheless provided the most sustained production base for Italian attempts at popularizing their own past. Hawes discusses the importance of *Cabiria* (1914) and rightly signals Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969) as *Caligula's* most recognizable source, yet he would have done well to think more extensively about Italy's more recent penchant for the peplum costume drama.

Although Chapter Two ("Tablets and Parchment") provides ample historical background that discusses Caligula's relative achievements in relation to known historical sources, the book finally tells the story of the film proper in Chapter Three ("A Movie Marriage.") Hawes upholds Bob Guccione as the principal architect of *Caligula*, citing his previous investment in sophisticated films for an adult audience (*Chinatown* (1974)), his vision for the *Penthouse* empire, and his business savvy (81-82). Guccione's work was supplemented by co-producer Franco Rossellini (a relative of director Roberto) who had previously worked with Pier Paolo Pasolini on an erotically-charged adaptation *The Decameron* (1971), and who had been developing a film of Gore Vidal's novel *The City and the Pillar* (1948) that was ultimately never made (82). Guccione and Rossellini approached Vidal in 1975, giving him a favorable deal to write a screenplay for a film that was to be called *Gore Vidal's Caligula* (83).

One commonplace about feature filmmaking is that it is always a collaborative effort. Tinto Brass envisioned *Caligula* as a follow-up to *Salon Kitty* (1976) that would warn about the corrupting influence of power (90-95). Brass is an unsung visionary in his own right, whose stylistic excesses (he was especially fond of moving cameras and zoom lenses) seek to highlight the minutiae of the emperor's decline and fall. While Vidal had agreed to write a screenplay for a film that attempted a broadly realist rendering of the Imperial Roman milieu (one more grounded in the polymorphous nature of pagan sexuality, which did not see taboos about homosexual encounters in the same way as contemporary audiences), Brass was advocating an exposé on Roman excess that was more political and sensationalist. Neither Vidal nor Brass gave Guccione the sexy historical romp that he wanted. Chapter 4 ("Editions of Caligula") meticulously works through each of the main versions of the movie, a somewhat tedious slog that is probably of interest only to completists. Hawes' most insightful bit of textual analysis comes at this point, though. As a feature that had to fulfill both the expectations of a narrative and the demands of audiences for adult movies, *Caligula* has two "climaxes" that are reconciled in the same set-piece, a brothel sequence that showcases fully penetrative sex and solidifies Caligula as a truly mad leader who has the audacity to host orgies atop a lavish boat that is inside of his palace (158).

The book concludes with a chapter ("Release, History, Impact,") that details the fate of the film. While the details about the movie's distribution

and critical reception are welcome, Hawes goes a bit too far afield in suggesting its importance. While it was a transitional hybrid somewhere between legitimate feature and adult movie that also happened to straddle the era of big-screen adult movies and the shift to home video formats, his claims about the film's influence on the sexually charged television of the new millennium *(Sex in the City*, *Desperate Housewives)* are more coincidental and epiphenomenal than direct.

Hawes' book on *Caligula* succeeds as a production history of this contentious movie, and it provides a solid base for further historical and theoretical assessment of its strange mix of history, pomposity, and pornography.

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