Within the epic film broadly understood, special effects often fulfil a curious double function. First, they are the means by which impossible, spectacular past worlds can be represented; yet, in their second capacity, those same effects can be designed to convince viewers of the reality of that spectacle. They are consequently vehicles to render past worlds both incredible and credible.

Accordingly, underpinning the use of special effects in the creation of epic films are two seemingly contradictory impulses. The first is what Shilo McClean terms ‘fantastical’ effects, which foreground spectacular and impossible scenes. The second is its inverse – to render impossible worlds as real simulacra of an impossible fantasy. As such, special effects are often both the tools used to represent imagined past worlds as well as the tools designed to persuade audiences of their credibility, which in the case of the historical epic can often translate very crudely into a marker of quality and veracity.

The argument of this chapter is that biblical epics, as films which fall broadly into similar terrain as the historical epic, also fulfil their dual function in terms of special effects. However, the incredible functions of special effects, and particularly CGI, is often geared towards another kind of quality in terms of production values, in that it marks itself out as the kind of film that only a high-concept, well-funded studio production could achieve. This chapter will discuss such a dual role by examining two tropes relating to the biblical epic in its twentieth-century form, ultimately to argue that the use of special effects – especially CGI – in the biblical epic is designed to serve those two functions. First, they act as a guarantee of epic, monumental and superlative filmmaking, which creates a credible onscreen space for the depiction of miraculous or supernatural acts. Second, on the industrial level, they operate as a guarantee of Hollywood respectability (and hence granting them the authority to represent sensitive religious topics in the fiction film). As I will suggest below, the recreation of classical Greece and Rome in (particularly...
Hollywood) film has in some sense always been rooted in a broader issue of spectacle, surge and splendour, to the extent that the film itself is often a celebration not of the past but of the present, as ‘part of an overall process in which cinema displays itself and its powers’ (Neale 1980: 35). For the biblical film, I will argue, such a surge and splendour functions as a guarantor of quality and professionalism.

**Historical accuracy**

Despite the frequent lamentations of some critics about the epic’s apparently inevitable historical inaccuracy, the main issue here has to do only partly with the issue of historicity. As many contemporary commentators mentioned on the release of *Gladiator* in 2000, for instance, the whole point of the special effects-driven epic film is that there is a sense of wonder and awe, and it is an awe-some spectacle which often has very little to do with a historical past. Claims such as that of Eleonora Cavallini, for instance, are far from common, that ‘*Gladiator* puts much greater emphasis on the dramatic implications of its story than on historical authenticity or probability’ (2009: 102). Jerome de Groot similarly argues that the dramatic will always win out within the genre more broadly understood, since ‘the retelling of ancient stories is associated with the fantastical and mistily pseudo-real’ (2009: 226).

It is, then, only as a consequence of the absence of historicity that the epic – and the biblical epic, as I will argue – places so much emphasis on the internal credibility. Jeffrey Richards describes such a paradox with typical clarity in his observation that epics and historical films are always inaccurate, perhaps this is why there is such emphasis on ‘visual authenticity’: ‘the visual authenticity is seen to make up for the factual inaccuracies’ (2008: 1). To describe it another way, although viewers seem likely for the most part to accept the presence of an entirely mythical Kraken in their classical Greece, such an acceptance is contingent on that Kraken being realistically animated. It is not historical artifice which disrupts the film, but the revelation of the artifice of the special effects team.

If the concept of using credibility as a marker of quality is true for the depiction of the past wherein even the slightest incongruity can be fatal (Page and Warner 1999: 32; Miller 2006: 17 and ff.) it is especially true for the biblical film. As Lloyd Baugh observes, given that biblical films attempt precisely to film the ineffable, the divine, or the miraculous, ‘the question of the high-technological dimension of cinema is critical to the Jesus-film’ (1997: 4). From *The Ten Commandments* (1923) to *Risen* (2013), credibility and faith are primordial to the film; from the absence
of Christ in *Ben-Hur* (1969) to his gruelling close-ups in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), the biblical film relies on creating a space for onscreen belief as well as a space for off-screen faith.

**SFX as spectacle**

The argument that special effects act as a *function of spectacle*, becoming part of an industrial selling point driving audiences to the cinema, is of course nothing new in itself. Many of the scholars and critics who have addressed the question of epics – Steve Neale, Sheldon Hall, Robert Burgoyne, Joanna Paul, Bruce Babington, Vivien Sobchack and others – usually include within their definitions of ‘epic’ questions of genre, or else include cost, spectacle, setting, length and so on. As such, it seems to be impossible to define epics without taking into account the notion of spectacle, and the ways in which this kind of spectacle can be used as a vehicle to smuggle in other concepts like national identity, history, contemporary ideology-politics, and so on.

In fact, even in the dissensus over definitions, proof of spectacle as a fundamental aspect of Hollywood expression is still a cornerstone of the argument. For instance, while all of the above critics broadly agree that the epic is something to do with history, and ancient or classical history in particular, James Russell is one of the few critics to adopt a broader definition of epics which stretches to include *Dances with Wolves*, *Titanic* and others. Yet even so, Russell asserts that ‘stylistically, epic films were defined by a sense of scale that exceeded the Hollywood norm. The wide screen allowed for expansive long shots of landscapes, lavishly constructed sets and the thousands of extras facilitated by the vastly increased production budgets’ (2007: 11). So even while objecting to one of the core qualifying characteristics of the epic, the historical or ancient-world setting, Russell invokes the kinds of spectacle and high budgets most closely associated with those kinds of films in order to do so.

At the other end of the spectrum, Kirsten Moana Thompson treads more traditional ground in her definitions, but is nevertheless explicit about the industrial role of the epic as a means of creating spectacle. In her essay on Oliver Stone’s 2004 *Alexander*, she credits digital special effects as a key mode for enhancing ‘spectatorial immersion’. She argues that ‘digital innovations in special effects have enabled the intensification of the historical epic’s distinctive generic attributes of spectacularity, monumentality, and immersiveness’ (2011: 42). Finally, Shilo McClean, writing about special effects themselves, recognises the potential of CGI and digital effects to create spectacle (2007: 116), an issue which creates
a rather asymmetrical marketplace which overwhelmingly privileges Hollywood as a producer of the past.

**A double audience**

If spectacle involves a degree of affect – like horror, melodrama or pornography, genres which Linda Williams argues are more traditionally associated with bodily affect (1991: 4) – then it logically follows that the feeling of being overwhelmed by spectacular effects serves to evoke a bodily reaction of appreciation. Yet, contrarily, the seamlessness and verisimilitude is designed to encourage immersion and resignation to allow the underpinning historical/mythical message to emerge. So if this first point is correct, that effects in the epic film serve two competing but complementary functions, then logic dictates that they might also provoke two different reactions among the viewers. Sean Cubitt talks of this phenomenon as appealing to ‘a double audience, one that succumbs to the spectacle and one that appreciates it. The bulk of any given audience will enter the film with this double vision in place, pleased to be connoisseurs of effects and their generation, but equally delighted to be suckers for the duration, enjoying both spectacular technique and the spectacle itself, illusion and the machinery of illusion’ (2005: 277).

My point, then, is to build on this idea of a double audience to advance a third thesis, that the spectacle which is made possible by CGI, and which is thereby rendered credible through its seamlessness, is a means not to signal epic subjects, but to signal Hollywood itself. By using a range of effects and technologies which are almost uniquely available to big-budget Hollywood films, CGI becomes a guarantor of Hollywood’s capacity, authority and legitimacy to represent those subjects in the first place.

I do not, of course, pretend that such a thesis is entirely new territory. In defining the epic in the first place, Steve Neale points to its industrial function as a means of showcasing the dominant – even hegemonic – power of Hollywood in producing a kind of film which is beyond the reach of almost any other national cinema. As Neale describes it:

Epic is essentially [a term] used to identify, and to sell two overlapping contemporary trends: Films with historical, especially ancient world settings; and large scale films of all kinds which used new technologies, high production values and special modes of distribution and exhibition. (2000: 85)

This is the case partly because, as he claims, they need to appeal to international audiences in order to recoup the massive costs in the first place, but also because it provides a mechanism to ‘differentiate themselves
from both routine productions and from alternative forms of contemporary entertainment, especially television’ (85).

As such, it suddenly becomes possible to reconcile the new epic film (let’s say post-Gladiator) with earlier cycles, since the CGI of the later cycles clearly offers a means not only of conveying ever-greater spectacle, but also to signal their heritage as the legitimate descendants of earlier cycles of epics. Such a return to its roots has often been described, by Jeffrey Richards or Joanna Paul, for instance, in narrative and thematic terms, though there is an increasing number of scholars for whom the aesthetic markers of epics – most especially CGI and effects – are just as important, if not more so.

**Birds and the epic zoom**

One example which illustrates the ways in which CGI can function in its capacity as epic spectacle can be seen in two tropes: the appearance of narratively superfluous flocks of birds, and what I’ve called the epic zoom. These two are tropes which often appear in the new epics, and which are almost entirely created from CGI (rather than optical or other effects). They are otherwise unremarkable tropes – and this is entirely my point here – but whose lack of narrative consequence reveal their function as spectacular CGI (what we might otherwise call, colloquially, showing-off).

Perhaps the most obvious instance of the birds trope comes in *Gladiator*. In the scene immediately following Proximus’ entry into Rome, the spectator is forced to watch as the newly recruited gladiators encounter Rome for the first time. It is thus a double audience, in which the film’s audience is also watching the gladiators as a secondary, proxy audience. This device serves as a framing mechanism through which the partially CGI-rendered Coliseum announces itself as epic. Beginning with a level tracking shot between the characters, the camera cuts to match their point of view filmed from their eye level to take in the Coliseum from ground level. The shot is followed by a slow tilt upwards, scaling the heights of the buildings to reveal a massive, imposing structure viewed from the perspective of the slaves encountering it for the first time, with the same sense of awe as the twenty-first-century audience viewing a CGI-rendered ancient Rome for the first time in almost four decades. Its monumentality, to use Sobchack’s term, is both narrative and spectacular. Its narrative function recalls the earlier dialogue in which Marcus Aurelius points out Maximus’ hypocrisy in serving an idea of Rome when, as the emperor says, ‘but yet you have never seen it’. The choice of the words ‘seen it’, rather than ‘visited’, ‘been there’ or the
ideological ‘you are not a Roman’ serves to make the Coliseum into a form of visual metonymy in which the grandeur of the Roman Empire is served by the focal point of its flippant disregard for human life, a brutal space in which the cruelty and pitilessness of Rome is on full display. As Djoba the gladiator-slave announces, ‘I did not know men could build such things’, a line which is a very clear indication for the audience to join in with the characters’ awe: after all, until Gladiator’s use of CGI, we did not know humans could build such things either.

However, as the tilt gets halfway up the building, a flock of birds appears. This, and this is the point, aesthetically impressive but completely unnecessary and extraneous to the narrative. Their function is not motivated, but designed only to render a lifeless CGI-shot a little more natural and animated. Almost identical CGI-rendered shots of flocks of birds flying over a monumental space also feature in a range of other recent epics like Noah (2014), Pompeii (2014) and Scott’s recent Exodus: Gods and Kings (2014). Of course, four examples from dozens of films might not necessarily be considered as overwhelming proof, but it does suggest that they have become a frequent enough trope to be worthy of exploration. Their reuse, however, poses an important question: Why?

One answer can be found in another clip from Gladiator, this time an earlier scene which signals Commodus’ entry into Rome as the newly crowned emperor after the death of Marcus Aurelius and the attempted execution of Maximus. The scene begins with an impossible vantage point – a bird’s-eye view – looking down on the city of Rome, as the clouds part and we begin a slow, almost imperceptible zoom and pan across the city, before the clouds are used as a kind of dissolve to a shot looking upwards at one of the city gates. Scott likes this kind of shot, and he has reused it in, among other films, Kingdom of Heaven (2005), Robin Hood (2010) and a handful of other historical films, not to mention the classic opening shot of Blade Runner.

It is not only a favoured trick of Ridley Scott’s, however, but crops up elsewhere in a range of epic films. The same vantage point occurs in Agora (2009), for instance, where it is used both as a narrative link to Hypatia’s study of the orbit of planets, but also as an indexical way of showing that the petty troubles of mortals are inconsequential when viewed from a celestial sphere. In Amenábar’s version, the zoom begins in exactly the same way as an impossible view of the ancient city before panning and zooming delicately towards the earth, even incorporating some conveniently placed clouds to obscure the cut to ground level.

Within Agora the same epic zoom can be seen in reverse, too, though here Amenábar favours a series of cuts to increase the scale, making
the effects not quite seamless. Watching one scene in which a musician plays to an audience in the city’s amphitheatre, for instance, the camera slowly rises to switch the diegetic music to a non-diegetic soundtrack echoing throughout the atmosphere. A close analysis of the sequence also reveals that it is not quite a complete zoom: though the first zoom rises up and out of the auditorium on a drone shot, by the second cut the film’s cityscape is rendered entirely within the realm of the digital. A similar reverse-zoom occurs in *Troy* (2004), too, albeit in an entirely CGI-rendered scene without the cut between the physical and the digital. What links all of these examples together is not only, however, their similarity which demonstrates the extent to which these tropes have become commonplace within the epic. A secondary, but nevertheless important, point is that in all of these shots – with the possible exception of *Agora* – the CGI elements are narratively unnecessary.

My point here, then, is that when it is not serving the narrative, the CGI can function as a marker of spectacle, showcasing the new epic’s craft in the creation of verisimilar buildings, of the entire Roman forum, or the city gates. But the inclusion of the epic zooms, the bird’s-eye view of the city and the flocks of birds serve equally to showcase techniques of epic filmmaking pertaining to Hollywood’s high budgets. The birds must be individually animated to be plausible, and Peter Miller in his book *Smart Swarm* talks about how innovative developments in AI can create that effect but currently at an eye-watering expense. Thus, the birds in *Gladiator* use the same technology as the individually AI-animated orcs in Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings*, to organise a spectacular vision, but also to showcase the very technologies themselves.

**Special effects and the biblical epic**

Turning specifically to the biblical epic, then, the above suggests that films depicting religious or Christian themes ought logically to follow the codes and conventions established across the evolution of the historical epic. Indeed, as I will show below, in part such a claim is true. It is fair to suggest that many of the same tropes and uses of SFX can be identified as operating under the same set of assumptions, and work hard to promote the dual sense of credibility familiar to many modern epic films. However, before arguing for a set of genre conventions belonging to the historical epic, it is first necessary briefly to address the question of whether the biblical epic can even be considered as a part of the epic genre – especially given the scholarly disagreement over whether epic itself can be seen as a genre in its own right (Elliott 2014: 2–8).
Certainly, among the critics of biblical films, there seems to be broad disagreement. Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, in their canonical work on biblical epics, not only assert the existence of a biblical film genre, but they even offer three typologies of that genre (the Old Testament epic, the Christ film and the Roman/Christian epic) (1993: 4). They do, however, recognise inherent limitations in such generic categories: ‘Our plea is that our definitions are serviceable, and that generic theorists’ possible improvements on them will not alter their general shape’ (4).

Their definition is consequently tempered by the acknowledgement that it relies on generic markers which can exclude canonical films or include unexpected films. After all, their second category, the Christ film, would align such otherwise dissimilar films as *King of Kings* (1961), *The Robe* (1953) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) with *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) and *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964). Indeed, the tendency to look for similarities between such disparate films risks undermining the very aspects which make these films so very interesting, a point which Babington and Evans do later concede, accepting that ‘while in some contexts it is productive to talk of the Biblical Epic as a genre, more often the distinctiveness of the separate sub-genres demands consideration’ (33).

Another expert on spectacle and genre, Sheldon Hall, acknowledges the same problems. Discussing the marketing of George Stevens’ *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), Hall readily agrees that the film attempted to align with the broad generic conventions established by other biblical epics, all the while recognising that ‘the Biblical epic is, as a genre, somewhat problematic in its relationship to standard categories of commercial exploitation’ (2002: 170).

Other critics have been more explicit in their rejections of generic identities. Pamela Grace, in her book about Jesus films, identifies a series of generic markers which unite those films but steadfastly refuses to ascribe to them a single, unifying genre:

Conventional films about religious heroes are instantly recognizable. Average film-goers can easily identify the most common sounds and images, and, more importantly, they can name the particular values that the most traditional films of this kind uphold: blind faith, chastity, extreme forms of virtuous suffering, and the superiority of one religion over all others. What viewers – and film scholars – cannot name is the genre itself. (2009: 1)

Here, perhaps, it is worth reprising James Russell’s observation that even if these films might recycle familiar genre tropes and conventions, the aesthetic and industrial necessity for film to evolve and mutate is what
demands of them a conception as ‘the history of many related cycles [which] are often only visible retrospectively’ (8). As Graeme Turner similarly describes it, genre itself is always the reconciliations of two opposing tendencies, so that ‘each genre film has to do two apparently conflicting things: to confirm the existing expectations of the genre, and to alter them slightly. It is the variation from the expectation, the innovation in how a familiar scenario is played, that offers the audience the pleasure of the recognition of the familiar’ (1988: 86–8).

Given such a problematic starting position, the suggestion that the biblical epic can somehow be seen as a continuing, immutable object built around strict conventions is obviously problematic. Certainly, even a cursory overview of the films under discussion in this book demonstrates a wide variety of styles and approaches. However, for the purposes of my discussion of CGI and special effects, budget and cost do seem to underpin many of the agreements reached by the scholars discussed above, who almost unanimously see epic as ‘infallibly identified with a vision of the epic involving the biggest costs and display’ (Babington and Evans 1993: 8) The association of epic with spectacle and spectacle with cost seems, to follow Babington and Evans, to have emerged hand-in-hand with the earliest cycle of epic films, offering ‘cinematic standards [which] were set first by the epics of the early Italian cinema, and then by Griffiths’ great reconstruction of Babylon for Intolerance [...] offering] precedents of vast ancient-world reconstruction and matching expenditure’ (5).

Accordingly, it seems plausible to offer a definition of the biblical epic not by its strict adherence to a given genre, but rather by its inclusion of a set of recognisable qualities and epic conventions, or else permutations of that set. Certainly, for the purposes of this chapter, such a definition allows for a discussion of the use of special effects to communicate divine, supernatural or outright miraculous sequences as part of a credible storyline. One such convention, for instance, is the inclusion of a sense of spectacle, cinematic grandiloquence, or what Vivien Sobchack calls ‘monumentalism’ (1990) which often demands the inclusion of elements of special effects, either in their digital or analogue form.

Again Babington and Evans classify such spectacle as a *sine qua non* of the biblical epic in their proposal of a taxonomy spanning eleven kinds of spectacle (64–5). In their taxonomy, they include the spectacle of architecture (I), of ancient warfare (VIII) or of the act of God (XI). Citing them as ‘persistent themes’ in the adaptation of the Bible into film, the spectacle serves broadly the same function as monumentalism, or of the CGI effects discussed above: nominally, these varieties of spectacle open up a space for belief. It will be noted that my description of this
space for belief chimes neatly with the sense of ‘seamless’ special effects described above.

As it happens, there are instances in the biblical film which demonstrate precisely the persistence of the same tropes identified above as belonging to the epic film. The 2014 film, *Risen*, for instance, deals with a sceptical Roman centurion, Clavius (Joseph Fiennes), charged with recovering Jesus’ crucified body to quell a nascent uprising among his followers. Adopting the perspective of a non-believer who gradually comes to accept the divinity of Jesus, Clavius thus embodies the perspective of a group of characters which Grace qualifies as:

the skeptics, doubters, or cynical characters, who make snide comments about religious belief near the beginning of the film, only to be proved wrong at the end. These characters, who are often witty, attractive, and worldly, are stand-ins for the modern viewer; they make it easier to accept ideas such as miracles and heaven at the conclusion of the film. (13)

In this dual capacity as active agent and stand-in for the doubting spectator, the special effects rendered by CGI make a miraculous and literally incredible plot seem credible. Precisely at the moment in the film where Clavius begins to doubt his earlier cynicism, and as the first seed of faith is being sown, Reynolds’ film depicts a scene of the disciples trekking across the mountain tops in a New Testament exodus. Filmed from a helicopter shot passing overhead – a staple feature of the ‘spectacle of ancient warfare’ mentioned earlier – the procession is visited by a fleeting sense of the divine as a flock of CGI-rendered birds is seen to swoop and circle over their heads. Though seamless, the birds are narratively useful and evocative, functioning in the same capacity as the CGI birds of *Gladiator*’s Coliseum. Their inclusion raises the scene from the quotidian and pedestrian to an epic sense of grandeur and divinity, transforming their quest from a flight from persecution into a voluntary quest for self-identity and Truth.

The divine in this scene is thus injected into an otherwise mundane moment by being shackled to a kind of CGI which is designed simultaneously to pass unnoticed as well as to flag up the majesty of the film’s spectacle and the universal truth which a faith in Jesus is supposed to invoke. The special effects transform the everyday into ‘a place found in no other genre of films, a place where miracles occur, celestial beings speak to humans, and events are controlled by a benevolent God, who lives somewhere beyond the clouds’ (Grace 2009: 2). By this device of the CGI birds, the biblical film is allowed to navigate a delicate position whereby it addresses itself to (at least) a dual audience of believers and non-believers.
The latter group can be drawn in by the inoffensive and non-religious spectacle of the seamless CGI, which connects to other exemplars of the new epic film and which thus satisfy genre conventions as much as they contribute anything to the narrative of the film. The former group has historically proved to be more easily offended. As witnessed by the periodic backlash against a given, allegedly sacrilegious, Jesus film, biblical epics can often draw audiences who are sensitive to one specific, sometimes dogmatic, interpretation of a particular kind of faith. Through a careful use of selected tropes used as visual shorthand for the presence of the divine, therefore, filmmakers can reuse established tropes in an attempt, ‘implicit in any Hollywood product …, to please all of the people all of the time’ (Maltby 1990: 188). Like Renaissance painting before them, biblical epics have seemingly over time elaborated a rich a ‘visual vocabulary to teach the faith and to examine the issues of doubt, despair and hope in a mode accessible to “everyman/woman”’ (Apostolos-Cappadona 2004: 99).

Another example of special effects which elaborate such a vocabulary can be found in what is perhaps the most famous passage of the Old Testament, certainly in terms of its depiction in film, familiar even to non-Christian audiences: namely, the parting of the Red Sea. The evolution of special effects alongside the development of more sophisticated visual and digital effects offers a concrete demonstration of the ways in which, increasingly, seamless special effects open up a space for belief in the ‘spectacle of the act of God’ (Babington and Evans 1993: 65).

DeMille’s first version of The Ten Commandments, made in 1923, offers precisely the kinds of spectacle discussed above in its retelling of the life of Moses, and particularly in its narration of the exodus from Egypt. The sequence begins with a wide-angle shot of the escaping Hebrews arriving at the shores of the Red Sea, followed by a match-cut to the lines of pursuing Egyptians appearing on the skyline. The parallel editing and the wide-angled framing of the Egyptians on the ridge are both used as visually powerful tropes borrowed from the Western genre (a genre in which DeMille had first made his name in Hollywood) (Hoffmann 2009: 4), here used to emphasise the hopeless plight of the escaping slaves. A series of intercuts between the unarmed Hebrews pressed hopelessly along the shoreline and the mounted chariots of the Egyptians visualises the Bible’s account of the impasse, which can only be resolved by a literal deus ex machina.

In place of dialogue, with the film having been made in the silent era, the intertitles use quotations directly from Exodus to narrate first the magical appearance of a pillar of fire (though here interpreted as a line of fire – again a staple trope of the Western film), before Moses raises
his staff to part the waters of the sea to his right. The effect itself is, with hindsight, rather simplistic, in that it is clearly a gelatinous model of two waves of water coming together, which is then replayed in reverse. However, for 1923, it is clear that for those unfamiliar with the processes of special effects might well have seemed magical and confounding (Yablonsky 1974: 31). On the parting of the waters, the camera then cuts to a high-angle overhead shot (an embryonic epic zoom) of the Hebrews as they pass through the water, using a double exposure to simulate their passing through the looped footage of the water dividing.

For his second version of the film in 1956, DeMille ‘decided to rework the subject to take advantage of the vogue for epics brought on by the advent of the wide screen. And advantage was certainly taken. The result was a full-scale biography of Moses, all wool and hundreds of yards wide, the epitome of the gaudy, pious, lowbrow spectacle’ (Searles 1990: 18). His second version of the Red Sea sequence not only comes later in a much longer film (thus creating a greater sense of suspense for those – perhaps we can assume that this is the majority – who know what is coming), but also demonstrates a greater technical mastery of cinematic special effects in a pre-digital environment. Despite following a similar process (the reversed sequence of water flowing into a purpose-built tank), the combination of three doubly exposed shots creates a visually satisfying and spectacular effect. The first matte, with Moses (Charlton Heston) placed in the bottom centre of the frame, took advantage of the huge breadth of the then new capacities of CinemaScope to show the massive expanse of water before them. A second exposure shows gathering dark clouds on the horizon, which are seemingly sucked into the water, visually communicating the awesome might of God which had only been suggested by the intertitles in DeMille’s earlier version. The superimposition of a third matte, which ingeniously filmed falling water from a side angle, was exposed alongside the other two to create the convincing illusion of a wall of falling water separating the passage laid open for the escaping horde. The cumulative effect, even seventy years later, results in an impressive special effects sequence which combines spectacle with virtually seamless plausibility.

Finally, a 2006 miniseries of The Ten Commandments (directed by Robert Dornhelm and broadcast on Hallmark and the History Channel) offers an example of the same sequence rendered digitally, albeit at a comparatively much lower budget. The debt to earlier versions of the sequence is, from the outset, made obvious. The similarity of the framing offers visual confirmation of James Russell’s assertion of the long shadow cast by DeMille on the Hollywood industry, ‘establishing the conventions of the Hollywood historical epic and for forging continuities
across thirty years of Hollywood history’ (4). Just like the 1923 and 1956 versions, the low-angle shot of the crowds of Hebrews gathered on the shores of the Red Sea is matched by a cut to the pursuing Egyptians confounded by a pillar of fire (though here rendered as a narratively more plausible sandstorm), before cutting back to a high-angle shot of Moses raising his staff as he looks out to the sea in front of him.

Dornhelm’s addition to the Red Sea trope is to offer a meteorologically inflected version of the miracle, using library footage of swimming shoals of fish darting to and fro, then a shot of tectonic plates slipping under the earth’s crust, lava spilling out from an underwater volcano and a rather jarring and incongruous shot of a mushroom cloud, immediately preceding the parting of the water. A rapid epic zoom rises seemingly from the centre of the earth to the surface of the water, before a CGI sequence shows the waters parting before the fleeing slaves. Most of the spectacle – given the fairly unimpressive tone of Dornhelm’s version – comes from the rather melodramatic reaction shots of the Hebrews on the shore as they obediently file into the channel divinely created for them.

Dornhelm’s digital version of the *Ten Commandments*, when compared with DeMille’s versions of the same sequence of the Red Sea parting, thus serves to demonstrate my argument above about the dual function of special effects in biblical epics. In the later (digital) version, the spectacle comes not from the event itself, but is rooted in the extent to which the handling of the miraculous is depicted as seamless and visually convincing. In order to fulfil the latter criterion, the sequences reuse epic tropes such as the epic zoom and CGI birds to offer a narratively compelling, but also visually spectacular depiction of the miracles. Where the Exodus itself might be classified as epic realism, on the grounds that the camera often stays with the crowds rather than using CGI-generated aerial shots, ‘the Red Sea sequence belongs predominantly to the mode of epic expressionism’ (Babington and Evans 1993: 63).

As much as it might belong to the realm of the spectacular, however, the jarring inconsistency of Dornhelm’s version of the sequence also demonstrates the latter point, that the seamlessness of the special effects also plays an important role. It is not only about spectacle in this case, but the fact that the only unconvincing version of the sequence comes from a lower-budget TV version of the tale demonstrates that part of the gargantuan scale of special effects is in part to show off the technical capacities of Hollywood filmmaking in its epic mode. As Michael Wood puts it:
The ancient world of the epics was a huge, many-faceted metaphor for Hollywood itself ... [T]hese movies are always about the creation of such a world in a movie. The hero of *The Ten Commandments* is not Moses, but De Mille himself, who set up the whole show, the voice of God and the burning bush and the miracles of Egypt included. And the hero of *Ben-Hur* is not Ben-Hur, who only won the chariot race, but William Wyler, the director, the man responsible for providing the chariot race for us. (1989: 173, cited in Russell 2007: 144)

So, the use of awesome and spectacular special effects is not only about realism as linked to certain conventions, but continues a tradition to some extent inaugurated with *The Robe*, which oversaw the emergence of a ‘cycle of Biblical epics [that] collided with technological innovations that broadened the cinematic frame, thus adding potential for larger scale spectacles ... In the process the historical epic became indelibly linked to widescreen spectacle’ (Russell 2007: 27). As a consequence, CGI in the biblical epic is inextricably tied not only with a sense of spectacle, but functions as a form of industrial guarantor of credibility which becomes over time synonymous with the Hollywood epic.

**CGI as industrial guarantor**

So, to put all of these ideas together, my proposition is that the double audiences of CGI operate together as a kind of symbiosis between push and pull: the effects used in these films pull the viewer into the diegesis in order to convince them of the verisimilitude of these historical representations. But at the same time, the very spectacle created by those effects can also be embraced for repulsion: they are used by Hollywood in particular to push the viewer away into a position of spectacle and into a world where the impossible is digitally rendered as plausible. Perhaps, then, the frequent claims that epics encourage total spectatorial immersion should be viewed with a measure of scepticism. As the examples above suggest, the CGI birds and the epic zooms of both historical and biblical epics is not the same kind of immersion as 3D, but it is instead closer to what Sobchack and others call monumentality, which requires the viewer to step back and admire the whole as part of a plausible package of Hollywood mastery. The camera work in all of the sequences discussed is permanently and perpetually in motion, using tracks, pans and tilts to embrace the massive spectacle on offer, and disorientating the viewer by the vertiginous scale of these productions. It is not only designed to pull the viewer in, but as a largely North American phenomenon it is a cinematic form of Shock and Awe – a not inconsequential
term given the parallels between US-made epics and the contemporary political landscapes in which those films were released.

As Monica Cyrino observes, the epic has often functioned as a showcase, but it is the new power of CGI which really allows those effects to increase the visual pleasure of the spectator:

[The film industry has always used the epic film as a showcase for the display of new cinematic techniques ... With the recent advent of computer-generated imagery (CGI), blue-screen and other modern technological advances, extravagant digital special effects have become, and continue to be, an intrinsic part of the production of contemporary epic cinema. (2010: 34)]

Thus, in the twenty-first century, the epic film’s dependence on CGI and special effects makes them operate on (at least) two different levels. The first is in the creation of a believable narrative world, in which the CGI fulfills a double role as a guarantor of credibility while systematically creating incredible images. At the same time, however, in terms of their aesthetic and industrial function, those same effects signal both a return to a certain type of filmmaking uniquely associated with Hollywood, as well as a means to promote Hollywood itself as the producer of that spectacle.

If both of these functions operate in tandem, then it means that the new special effects continue an earlier tradition of mattes, thousands of extras, massive physical sets and huge financial backing, a tradition whose original purpose was to legitimate Hollywood’s capacity and authority to reproduce the past in the first place. Issues like the CGI birds or the epic zooms to contain entire cities which have been crafted through CGI all take their part as a series of industrial, commercial, generic and aesthetic nods self-consciously to legitimate the capacity of the epic film to resurrect the past. And it is here, having first legitimised their role as myth-maker, that the other kinds of ideological work can start.

Conclusion

The objectives of special effects in the biblical epic can be seen to be broadly aligned with those of the classical Hollywood epic in its broader iterations. Writing in 1992, Gerald Forshey proposed that one reason for the demise of the Jesus film was because of its inherent lack of spectacle, suggesting that ‘Religion is not spectacular in films any longer, but neither is it insignificant’ (180). Following a slew of alternative hagiopics which collapsed the distance from Jesus, Forshey’s
comments describe the problem of the religious epic in terms of how the portrayal of the divine ‘illuminates the ways that people struggle for values in a pluralistic society’ (180). While the recent resurgence of the epic has proved Forshey’s prediction wrong (religion has often proved to be entirely spectacular in the recent revival of the biblical epic), his comments about the divisiveness of the religious and biblical film proved to be prescient.

In this chapter, I have argued that one way of navigating such divisiveness has been through the use of CGI to create ancient and biblical worlds, to render credible some staple tropes of the genre and to underpin a renaissance in epic filmmaking which has harnessed the power of spectacle in the reiteration of a specifically Hollywood vision of the past. Such credibility, I argue, is intrinsic to the epic film, but it is primordial for the biblical epic since that is a kind of film which relies on an a priori dual audience and the creation of a credible and respectful divine space within which those divine events can realistically unfold. As Grace suggests, ‘a director’s handling of the miraculous says a great deal about the overall intention of a film’ (2009: 108). Certainly, the first commandment in the biblical epic seems to be not to offend the sensibilities of the audience, whether they are believers or not (Forshey 1992: 2).

CGI’s capacity to use epic tropes, then, offers a way around the thorny issue of viewer sensibilities. My arguments above show that where, on the one hand, CGI can be harnessed to offer a seamless space for the credible intervention of the divine into mundane affairs, on the other, the sophistication of those effects acts as an industrial guarantor of the capacity and authority of Hollywood to take on those miraculous subjects in the first place.

Notes

1 See also Elliott (2014: 137).
2 See also Forshey (1992: 69–70).

References


