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**"From the Bowery to Coney Island: Re-branding Pompeii as American Mass Culture, 1834-1908"**

This paper considers the appropriation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, as a vehicle for American mass culture towards the end of the nineteenth century. While Lord Lytton's historical novel had inspired a number of earlier American adaptations – most notably the apocalyptic melodramas performed in the artisanal theaters of New York's Bowery in the 1830s and 40s, and the sentimental novels and poems of antebellum New England writers like William Giles Dix – this later Pompeian "revival" was distinctive in both form, reception, and context. By the 1880s, innovations and improvements in technologies of scenographic display enabled leading stage designers to re-enact the destruction of Pompeii through the illusionistic media of panoramas, cycloramas, dioramas, and – with the addition of fireworks and orchestras – "pyrodramas." Located in the new public spaces of commercial theater districts and amusement parks, these spectacles reached out beyond the exclusive ranks of male artisans and sentimental readers, to attract a larger, less differentiated urban population that encompassed a new immigrant working class. The producers of these shows, in the process of emphasizing their technological aspects, and catering to the linguistic diversity of their audiences, in turn reformulated the narrative content of Pompeii itself. The themes of artisanal revenge and Christian conversion that had dominated antebellum theatrical and literary productions were abridged or edited out altogether, in favor of the more sensational attractions of collapsing buildings and simulated conflagrations.

This paper focuses in particular on the production and reception of the Pompeian spectacles brought to American cities by the leading English stage designers, Matthew Somerville Morgan and James Pain. Whereas film historians have tended to subsume their entertainments within a teleological narrative leading to the birth of cinema, and ultimately to the cinematic spectacles of De Mille and Schoedsack (including the latter's *Last Days of Pompeii* of 1935), I resituate them within their own cultural contexts. The meanings elicited by contemporary spectators were over-determined by the multiple invocations of the "volcanic plot" within urban discourses of the period. Commentators from both conservative and radical positions repeatedly allegorized the class resentments and labor conflicts transpiring within urban America as "subterranean" forces on the threshold of "eruption"; while those commentators who recognized the increasing centrality of consumption and commercial spectacle in the recreational lives of Americans also found a potent analogy in the imagery of "luxury-craving" Pompeian audiences annihilated within the spectacular space of the amphitheater. Only by reading these spectacles as historicist narratives, rather than assuming them to be "pre-narrative" or purely "spectacular" attractions, can we fully understand their significance within fin-de-siècle American culture.