

Alison FUTRELL
Gladiators and "True History"

Blood spectacle in ancient cinematic epics has long represented the quintessence of brutal Rome. Displays of the Roman Games emphasize the luxury, waste and degradation that would ultimately, in the popular assessment, lead to the fall of the Empire. Individual gladiators, however, carry even more symbolic weight than the Colosseum. Standing outside historical time, the gladiator encapsulates a moment of counter-history, acting as an agent whereby the ancient past is disproved, the eternity of Rome is disrupted. Drawing on examples from *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *Spartacus* (1960) and *Gladiator* (2000), this paper considers how the Hollywood gladiator functions as an emblem of future truths, as a signpost for the personal, political, and social transformation that will destroy Rome and create the modern world.

Having been converted to Christianity in 1953's *The Robe*, the title character in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* undergoes a crisis of faith: he finds it difficult to accept that the death of the body is a means of finding everlasting love. Demetrius is too carnal, too responsive to old patterns of physicality and violence, indeed, he is too "Roman" to find Christianity easy. The film presents him as a mirror and contrast for Rome, which in its early days had faith, a quality weakened by conquest and destroyed by the Caesars. Strongly tempted by the arena (and Messalina), Demetrius loses Christ and sets off down the path of mayhem, sex and self-destruction when he witnesses the death of a Christian girl at the hands of licentious gladiators. His spiritual recovery, characterized in the film as a return to life and freedom, serves as the catalyst for a new, enlightened rule that allies toleration of Christianity with the establishment of political and personal ethics.

The prologue to *Spartacus* also juxtaposes Roman tyranny and slavery to the coming of Christianity, characterizing this gladiator as an agent of the future death of slavery. The narrative emphasizes the dehumanizing tendencies of the Roman economy, demonstrated by the training methods used by the *ludus* that make the gladiators into animals, fighting to please the jaded Roman spectators. *Spartacus'* rebellion asserts the humanity of the slaves, the essential brotherhood of the oppressed, finding true victory not on the battlefield but in the creation of an alternative system of value in opposition to eternal Rome's cycle of oppression.

Framed and punctuated by images of rippling wheatfields, *Gladiator* offers a vision of Rome that both undermines and reinforces the cinematic trope of the decadent empire. Maximus, a "simple" soldier, fights to preserve an ideal of Rome that stands as a bastion against brutality, cruelty and darkness. His Rome is reflected in eternity, a source of light stemming from the timeless rustic values at the foundation of Roman culture. His faith in this Rome is all the stronger for his never having seen the capital city. When the corruption that has tainted Rome destroys his family, Maximus loses his moral center, his "real" life, and is now required to fight "for nothing", for death in the arena. Maximus regains a sense of himself when he realizes his opportunity to transform the spectacle into truth; by "winning the crowd" he can fulfill the dream of Marcus Aurelius and "give

Rome back her true self", freed from Commodus' oppression. This gladiator thus points forward, to the unrealized Roman "promise of peace" heralded in the film's prologue.