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**The Vision of a Fascist Rome in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator***

In previous Hollywood epics set in the Roman world, Rome was generally seen as representing a cruelty and sexual decadence that would be overthrown by the triumph of Christianity (*The Robe* [1953], *Ben Hur* [1959]). Even Anthony Mann's *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) concluded with Rome succumbing to internal decadence, having rejected the values of peaceful incorporation espoused by the Greek ex-slave (and secret Christian) Timonides. Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, however, generally avoids these traditional themes: the one brief scene of persecution of Christians was omitted from the final release, and the spiritual values of the hero are clearly depicted as differing from those of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Instead the emphasis is on reliance on the traditional family values of an uncorrupted rural periphery. Maximus must avenge his murdered Spanish wife and family by killing the patricidal and incestuous emperor at Rome, and reestablishing the traditional government of the Senate after Commodus' populist tyranny. Rather than the popular uprising attempting to overthrow the entire ruling structure depicted in *Spartacus* (1960), in *Gladiator* there is a restoration of conservative values by the concerted actions of members of the upper classes (Maximus, Gracchus, and even Lucilla). Hence the contest for the favour of the crowd conducted in the arena, particularly between Commodus and Maximus.

The power and brutality of Rome is depicted in ways which have clear links with Fascist imagery. The black-clad Praetorian guard act as Commodus' Gestapo, while the inauguration of his reign in the city echoes Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934) in clear contrast to the celebration of the triumphal entry in Mann's epic. Cinema reviewers have also noted the similarity of the architecture of this imaginary Rome to the plans of Albert Speer. This is hardly accidental: the reading of Rome as a fascist city was an inspiration for the National Socialists and the Italian Black Shirts. The Colosseum, the site of the violent struggle between the protagonists in the film for the support of the mob and for their own lives, with its associations of durability and power, was recreated at Rome by Mussolini as the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana in EUR. This can be contrasted with the imaginary panorama of Rome derived from Renaissance paintings, bathed in the light of a new dawn, shown at the conclusion of *Gladiator*.

The tension between the popular image of a brutal, oppressive Rome and the vision of Roman civilization as a mainspring of western civilization is thus central to *Gladiator*. This tension is also evident in the teaching of Roman topics in Classics departments around the world: Ridley Scott's epic film thus assists in forcing Classicists to respond to this dualistic depiction.