How America Sees the Roman Empire

by Barbara Lockett

Situated between the Esquiline and Palatian Hills, near the Tiber River is the shell of an ancient structure that has a history of more than 2000 years. It is the ruins of the Flavian Theater, the largest of the ancient Roman amphitheaters.[1] Most Americans will recognize it whether they have been to Rome or not. Motion pictures and television have given it life and in the American mind it is more than an archaic, decaying pile of bricks. This is the majestic Coliseum, which housed gladiatorial games and wild beast hunts during a time when Rome ruled the world and emperors ruled Rome.

Americans are fascinated by this ancient city; perhaps, as *Ben Hur* star Charlton Heston suggested, because it is the place of our Judeo Christian heritage.[2] Whether or not this is the reason, Americans have an appetite for Roman epics and Hollywood stands ready to serve them.

For decades, filmmakers have laced history with fictitious characters and events to create explosive film epics. Over 400 films have been made about ancient Rome, many of them by American film studios, and these films have shaped the minds of Americans.[3] They have enjoyed a warm reception from modern audiences as they color the past, yet make the connection between antiquity and present day.[4]

Three sand and sandal epics that have particularly helped form my perception of ancient Rome are the high grossing 1959 academy award winning *Ben Hur*, the 1960 box office smash *Spartacus*, and the more recent blockbuster *Gladiator.* These films are representative "of a particular genre

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[1] Eckhart Kohne and Cornelia Ewigleben, eds., *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 143.

[2] *United Press International*, "'Ben-Hur' Gives Maximus Thumbs-Up," Feb. 28, 2001, p.1008060u4322.

[3] Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema, (*London: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1978), 15; Peter C. Rollins, "Film, Television, and American Studies," 1979, *Hollywood as Historian*, Peter C. Rollins, ed., (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 1 [1-19].

[4] Martin M. Winkler, "The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945," *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture,* Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGruire, Jr., eds. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 51.

which requires a fixed organization of the story material." [5] They touch on many aspects of life during the time of Roman rule and especially exploit the cultural elements of slavery and spectacles that were so much a part of ancient Roman life. Each film has a specific story to tell as it casts Rome in the role of villain, corrupted by the very power that made it great.[6] Readers, however, are reminded that filmmaking is a business and it is the business of entertainment, not historiography. So how accurate are these historic epics and how much is Hollywood hype?

What appears to be Hollywood magic is, in fact, business, and historical cinema is particularly a risky business. [7] Most Hollywood movies follow formulas and traditions that have proven successful and have achieved the desired audience reaction. One cannot expect an exact historical account from such motion pictures as *Ben-Hur* or *Spartacus* or *Gladiator*. They are, after all, made in Hollywood and, as movie reviewer Alan Taylor pointed out, "everything is a sacrificial lamb . . . to the demands of studio moguls and box office returns."[8] It is difficult for film producers and directors to find a balance between historical accuracy and dramatic effect. They must rely on the critical viewer to take some responsibility in recognizing this balance.[9] *Spartacus*, *Ben Hur* and *Gladiator* were each made for a Judeo-Christian audience, an audience that may be unaware of the filmmaker's agenda. It would take, for example, a scrutinizing eye to recognize the thinly veiled Judeo-Christian overtones in the films *Spartacus* and *Gladiator*, but they are there, albeit not as obviously as they are in *Ben-Hur*.

Ben-Hur is a story of Christ, as indicated in the sub-title of the novel written by Indiana-born Civil War general Lew Wallace, on which the film is based. Wallace was not intending to promote Christianity. Nor was he writing a historical account of the times, though his research was copious and impeccable. He wanted to write a best-selling novel during a time when

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[5] Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Re-staging the Past, (*New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980), 26.

[6] Martin M. Winkler, "Star Wars and the Roman Empire," *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, Martin M. Winkler, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 275 [272-290].

[7] Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*, (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966) 15.

[8] Tony Barta, ed., *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998), 168.

[9] Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 21.

Christians were not reading novels. By telling a tale of Christ, he hoped to capture the audience of the best selling book of the time, the Bible.[10]

Ben-Hur was published in 1880. Initially sales were low and it wasn't until after the first year that Wallace began realizing his dream. By the end of the second year sales began to increase and eventually the book sold over two million copies. It became the first best-selling novel and remained on the best-seller list for years.[11]

Spartacus was also made to appeal to the Christian audience, though the events occurred over 70 years before the birth of Christ. The 1960 production is about a Thracian slave who became the leader of the third slave revolt during the Roman Republic. An obvious indication that the film targets a Christian audience is the crucifixion of Spartacus, who, in fact, was not crucified, but died on the battlefield. The film does not stray too far from historical reality though. Appian (*The Spartacus Slave War*) reported that approximately six thousand slaves who survived the final battle were captured and crucified along Appian Way,[12] the backbone of the Roman highway system.[13]

Forty years after the success of *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*, the award-winning *Gladiator* splashed across the screen. During this time gap, the Christian stranglehold on American culture had relaxed and Hollywood had come to acknowledge the premise upon which this country was founded – the freedom of religion. By the end of the twentieth century, literary attention, including that of filmmakers, was more obviously focusing on the poorer classes and the oppressed in their fights for freedom and control.[14] Filmmakers found a formula that was more successful with modern audiences and replaced the Supreme Being with the omnipresent hero.

Gladiator maintains the fundamental theme of the sand and sandal epic, but the Judeo-Christian influence was almost subliminal. Rome is still the villain and the message is still that power leads inevitably to corruption.[15] Rome is personified by Commodus, the Roman emperor who reigned from 180-192

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[10] Irving McKee, *'Ben-Hur' Wallace*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947), 164.

[11] Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema,* 126.

[12] Brent D. Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents,* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 140-141.

[13] Gino Lorenzelli, "Paving the Way for the Roman Empire," *The World Paper*, http://worldpaper.com/Archievewp/1998/Dec98/gino.html

[14] Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood,* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002) 32.

[15] Martin M. Winkler, "Star Wars and the Roman Empire," 286.

A.D.[16] In the film, Commodus is overcome in the arena as he fought against the hero, Maximus. Though Maximus also dies in the battle with Commodus, the film ends leaving the audience with the illusion that Maximus lives on and joined his murdered wife and son in an afterlife of tranquil beauty – a place that many believe to be heaven.

Screenwriters rarely present heroes with serious flaws in their character. If necessary, they clean them up to match their achievements. In Spartacus, for instance, screenwriter Dalton Trumbo and director Stanley Kubrick show the rebel leader of Roman times attempting to end slavery everywhere though little trace remains of his purpose and ambitions.[17] Spartacus was probably not a revolutionary. According to Plutarch (*The Life of Crassus*), his intent was to get his followers out of Italy and returned to their homelands.[18]

Spartacus characterizes the slave leader as a great humanitarian, yet the real Spartacus participated in the slaughter of hundreds of innocent Romans.[19] According to Florus, Spartacus, who led the insurrection that drew Rome into a "disgraceful war against slaves," was not an impressive character; but a vengeful gladiator who sought liberty for the undeserving.[20] According to Appian (*Civil Wars 1.9.116*), Spartacus had once been a Thracian soldier who defected from the Roman auxiliaries,[21] but few historical accounts of the rebellion or its leader are available from antiquity. The writers of the time were the elite of Rome and they "did not find slave rebellion a worthy subject for historical discourse."[22]

The rebellion was summarized in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* some 100 years after it occurred. In his biography of Crassus, where he presented the Roman general's career, Plutarch sought to demonstrate "the dangers of political

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[16] Marcel Le Glay, Jean-Louis Voisin & Yann Le Bohec, *A History of Rome*, 2nd ed., (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 294.

[17] Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) 35; Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 146.

[18] Paul Turner, ed., *Selected Lives from the Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), 256.

[19] Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*, 26.

[20] Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, 35.

[21] Alison Futrell, "Seeing Red," *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGuire, Jr., eds. (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002) 80.

[22] Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, 35.

ambition."[23] Known to most as the Spartacus slave war, Plutarch referred to it as the "commotion of fencers".[24]

One of the earliest known wall drawings from Pompeii is a fresco on an entrance of a house. It dates back to 100-70 B.C., the time when the rebel slave was in gladiatorial training. In the scene are two gladiators on horseback fighting each other. Above the man on the right, written in Oscan, is the word Spartacus (Spartaks). Since Spartacus trained in the nearby gladiator school and since the Thracian name was uncommon to this area, the fresco is thought to be associated with the rebel leader.[25]

It was from Plutarch that we learn of the villainous Lentulus Batiatus and his gladiator school in the city of Capua. Plutarch tells how Batiatus housed slaves in locked barracks, how he trained them and forced them to fight one another until death. It was there, in the gladiatorial training camp that the rebellion began.[26]

Plutarch implicates the inhumane treatment of Batiatus, not the institution of slavery, as being responsible for the rebellion.[27] Appian (*Civil Wars 1.9.116*) believed the gladiators fled not only to escape danger but also shame, "preferring freedom to the ignominy of providing amusement for spectators."[28]

Like the two slave wars before it, the Spartacus slave war began small, with only 78 gladiators successfully escaping the training camp, but escalated to a monumental rebellion.[29] According to Plutarch, herdsmen and shepherds from the nearby countryside soon joined the initial group of trained fighting rebels.[30] Appian suggested that it grew to 120,000,[31] but Eutropius (*Digest 6.7*) estimated it to be only 60,000.[32]

Though the rebel leader has fared well throughout history, gaining esteem and acclaim over the years, he remained a virtual unknown until Karl Marx and other revolutionaries glorified him in the nineteenth century. This historical slave leader and the rebellion he led have been "reworked and reinterpreted in light of

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Turner, *Selected Lives from the Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, 256.

[25] Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents,* 15.

[26] Turner, *Selected Lives from the Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, 256.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Futrell, "Seeing Red," 80.

[29] Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire,* 146; Turner, *Selected Lives from the Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, 256.

[30] Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery*, (Baltimore and London The John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 216.

[31] Futrell, "Seeing Red," 80.

[32] Ibid.

contemporary political, social and economic values."[33] The event has been used "as a metaphor for resistance to industrial capitalism."[34] Many historians of the rebellion who wrote during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented Spartacus as a hero of the oppressed.[35] Among these was Karl Marx.[36]

During the middle of the nineteenth century when Guiseppe Garibaldi was engaged in liberating Sicily and southern Italy from foreign control and the American Civil War was ablaze, Karl Marx was prompted to read about the ancient Roman civil wars. When he was asked by his daughter to name his hero, Marx identified Spartacus as one of the two.[37]

American playwright Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird, whose play *The Gladiator* was first performed in 1831 with Edwin Forrest cast as Spartacus, wrote about the Nat Turner slave rebellion in the state of Virginia:[38]

> If they had had a Spartacus among them to organize the half million of Virginia, the hundreds of thousands of the [other] states, and lead them on in the Crusade of Massacre, what a blessed example might they not give to the world of the excellence of slavery!

The 1960 film version of *Spartacus* was based on the novel written by communist sympathizer Howard Fast. In the dedication to his two children he said he hoped the book would "inspire them to struggle against oppression" and in our own time, to "fulfill the dream of Spartacus."[39] This adulated portrayal of Spartacus is represented in Stanley Kubrick's 1960 film. Dalton Trumbo wrote the screenplay a decade after the publication of Fast's novel.

Fast and Trumbo had been blackballed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) during the McCarthy era for their communist ways and for refusing to name others involved in such political actions. Their influence is especially evident in a scene from *Spartacus*, when slaves, who had been promised freedom for identifying their leader, protected him instead, by standing up one after another declaring "I am Spartacus." Maria Wyke suggests that the film has reconstructed the renegade slave into a hero in order

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[33] Futrell, "Seeing Red," 77.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, 35.
[36] Shaw, *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, 14.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*, 59.
[39] Ibid., 60.

to "expose the vicious assaults on domestic Communism that had been such a feature of American culture in the Cold War era."[40]

At the end of the film, Spartacus was crucified, not for his religious beliefs, as Christ was a century later, but for his "political challenge to corrupt government."[41] Screenwriter Trumbo opposed the crucifixion of Spartacus in the final scene. He believed it linked the slave rebel to Christ, and thus represented him as a spiritual martyr instead of the political militant he was.[42]

In the final analysis, *Spartacus* is about slavery and a fight for freedom. The film has often been referred to as 'the thinking man's epic', because it "celebrates not the glory and might of Rome but an individual who dared oppose Rome in his struggle for personal freedom."[43]

Slavery was a key element in the social organization of ancient Rome.[44] In the eighth century B.C., Rome was just beginning to grow into a major city, but already its influence was being felt throughout Italy and the Mediterranean basin.[45] The wealth of Rome was the reward of conquest, but with such privilege came the responsibility of feeding the people. Agriculture was, therefore, of great importance, more than mining, industry and commerce combined. The agriculturally based economy relied on the practice of slavery.[46] Slaves were tools; possessions which brought status to their owners.[47]

The majority of slaves throughout the empire were acquired by two sources—war and piracy.[48] Rome could not rely on the reproduction of slaves to maintain the continuously increasing demand. For one thing, such a practice would have been influenced by the number of available slave women and there were far more male than female slaves,[49] maybe because women in Roman

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[40] Ibid., 67.

[41] Ibid., 63.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Jon Solomon, "The Sounds of Cinematic Antiquity" *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, Martin M. Winkler, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 330 [319-337].

[44] Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery,* 1.

[45] Bruce Bower, "Early Rome: Surprises Below the Surface," *Science News*, Jan. 14, 1989 v. 135 n2 p20(1).

[46] Shaw *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents* 4; Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery*, 8.

[47] Valerie Hope, "Status and Identity in the Roman World," in *Experiencing Rome,* Janet Huskinson, ed., (London Routledge, 2000), 128 [125-152]; Wiedemann , *Greek and Roman Slavery*, 8.

[48] John Madden, "Slavery in the Roman Empire" from a lecture given at the Annual Summer School of the Classical Association of Ireland in Galway, August, 1994. http://www.ucd.ie/~classics/ClassicsIreland.html

[49] Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire,* 147.

society were already relegated to a subservient role.[50] Another cultural aspect that influenced the reproduction of slaves is shown in a scene from *Spartacus* when Varinia is brought to the slave's chamber at the Capua training camp. Spartacus admitted to her that he had never been with a woman. Batiatus and the slave trainer Marcellus watched from above and chided Spartacus, who yelled at them, "I am not an animal!" Varinia was taken from Spartacus and led to the chamber of another slave, showing the Roman practice of rewarding male slaves with the pleasures of a woman. Segregating the male slaves from the women is one practice that may have necessitated the continual conquering of Rome's peripheries and utilizing the conquered as slaves.

The work of a male slave was difficult, especially for agricultural and mining slaves and life expectancy was short. Of the women slaves, there were more in the cities than on country estates or in mining areas.[51] The urban slaves fared better than their agricultural counterparts. Many were educated, some even more than their masters. Though countless stories exist about cruelty to domestic slaves, they were more pampered and privileged than rural slaves.[52]

Slavery was clearly presented as a state of subjection in ancient Rome, where jurists defined "the rights and obligations of each status group."[53] Slaves were thought to be less civilized. Pliney, the Younger (*Letters 3.14*) warned that no master, even a considerate and kind one, was without danger, because "it is their brutality, not their reasoning capacity, which leads slaves to murder masters."[54] The Theodosian Code (*4.8.5*) stated that the first cause of slavery was sin but that slavery was not a permanent state. A slave would remain a slave unless his owner manumitted him according to procedure. Likewise, a free man would remain free unless he became a slave in some legal way.[55] Both situations can be seen in the film *Ben-Hur.*

The story of *Ben Hur* takes place during the reign of Tiberius, second emperor of Rome. During this time an event occurred which permanently impacted the Roman Empire and the entire Western World - the crucifixion of the Christ Jesus of Nazareth. The film, as the novel on which it was based, is subtitled *A Tale of Christ*, but the story follows the life of Judah Ben-Hur, not that of Christ. Both Tiberius and Christ are background figures in the film.

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[50] Ellen Green, "Elegiac Woman: Fantasy, Materia, and Male Desire in Propertius 1.3 and 1.11.", *American Journal of Philosophy*, Summer 1994 v116 n2 p303 (16).

[51] Bradley , *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 73.

[52] Keith Hopkins, "Novel evidence for Roman Slavery," *Past & Present*, Feb 1993 n138 p3 (25).

[53] Wiedemann *Greek and Roman Slavery*, 1.

[54] Hope, "Status and Identity in the Roman World," 129.

[55] Wiedemann *Greek and Roman Slavery*, 34.

This Roman/Christian epic is set in Judaea, a hotbed of religious controversy. The people of Judaea were of an ancient and unique culture that was centered on monotheism, that is, believing in one god who revealed divine truths through a set of sacred scriptures.[56] The Romans had a set of "traditional practices that were thought to establish contact between mortals and the gods and so to enable mortals to win divine favor."[57] The Romans feared that any break from tradition would anger the gods and their favor would be lost. The beliefs and religious practices of the rebellious providence of Judaea instilled such a fear in the Romans.

Judah, the prince of Hur, meets his fate with slavery at the hand of his childhood friend Messala, who has become a "brutal militarist"[58] with aspirations of being called to Rome. Messala sees the unyielding providence as his opportunity. He would rid Judaea of its antagonists and impose the Roman beliefs that have so far been met with bitter resistance. The people will submit to the powers of Rome and recognize the emperor as a God. Judah is caught in the clash between the two forces. [59] Here we may see a subtle influence that was so blatant in *Spartacus* – the influence of the McCarthy era. When Messala asks Judah to name the hostile Jews, Judah asks, "Would I retain your friendship if I became an informer?" The word informer is probably making reference to the HUAC and McCarthyism.[60]

The day the new governor rides through the streets of Judaea, Ben Hur joins his mother and sister on the rooftop to watch the procession. As his sister leans forward for a closer look, a loose tile breaks free and crashes to the street near the entourage, threatening the life of the governor. Messala seizes the opportunity to strengthen his own position by leading the Roman soldiers to Judah, whom he accuses and condemns to the galleys. Judah is no longer a free man. His mother and sister are also accused and sentenced to prison. Judah begs Messala to release them, but Messala refuses, choosing to further his own ambitions rather than defend his friend's wishes.

Galley slaves were chained to their rowing stations. Prior to a battle with pirates, Roman commander, Quintus Arrius orders that Ben Hur be unchained. The slave remains in the bowels of the ship with the others, taking his

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[56] Bruce Babington, and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema,* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 197; James Rives, "Religion in the Roman Empire," in *Experiencing Rome,* Janet Huskinson, ed., (London: Routledge, 2000), 247 [245-275].

[57] Rives , "Religion in the Roman Empire," 247.

[58] Martin M. Winkler, "The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945," 58.

[59] Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema,* 126.

[60] Winkler, "The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945," 67.

vengeance out on the oars. During the battle, the galley is rammed and destroyed. Without the chains to confine him, Judah is able to escape and save the distraught Arrius from the sinking vessel. The grateful Arrius, in turn, takes Ben Hur to Rome as a free man and adopts him as a son. Judah Ben Hur is no longer a slave.

Ben-Hur is about more than the feud of two childhood friends, one an aristocratic Jew and the other a Roman soldier who resents the Jews. It is about the oppressed against Rome. Messala represents Rome. "You are a conquered people. You live on . . . myths of the past. . . There is only one reality in the world today. Look to the West, Judah, . . . look to Rome."[61] Judah Ben-Hur represents the oppressed. "Rome is evil. . . the day Rome falls there will be a shout of freedom such as the world has never heard before."[62] Though the film emphasizes the conflict between the oppressed and the Roman Empire through Ben-Hur's estrangement from his childhood friend, it concentrates in parallel on the love Ben-Hur has for his family, a value of the Judeo-Christian audience for which the film was targeted.

Until the release of *Gladiator, Ben-Hur* was unchallenged as the most popular of all Roman Empire epics[63] and "ranks as one of the most successful literary, theatrical, and cinematic productions of all times." [64] After its long-running success as a novel, *Ben Hur* was adapted to the stage, both in London and on Broadway. William Jennings Bryan considered it "the greatest play on the stage."[65]

The first film version of *Ben-Hur* was shot in 1907 and made history of its own. Under the direction of Sidney Olcott, it was filmed by Kalem without permission of the book's publisher. Both Harper Publishing and the Wallace estate sued Kalem, which, after a few years, was forced to pay twenty-five thousand dollars. This set a precedent for all films of the future that were based on novels.[66] On April 16, 1921, *Publisher's Weekly* reported that A.L. Erlanger, Charles B. Dillingham and Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr. purchased all dramatic rights for *Ben Hur* from the Wallace estate. This included the motion picture rights, which cost the record price of $1,000,000.[67]

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[61] Ibid., 66.
[62] Ibid., 69.
[63] Winkler "Star Wars and the Roman Empire," 277.
[64] Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema,* 126.
[65] Ibid., 127.
[66] Ibid.
[67] *Publishers Weekly*, July 1997 v244 n31 p8(2).

The 1926 film version of *Ben-Hur* "established once and for all the credibility and viability of the Hollywood epic."[68] But it is the 1959 version that lives on in the minds of Americans -- not the conflict between Judah and Messala, nor the thin line throughout the film that connects Judah to Jesus. It is the chariot race for which, without a doubt, *Ben Hur* is most remembered. The film's two years of planning, the nine months of shooting, star Charlton Heston's three-hour lessons in driving a *quadrigae* from the day after he arrived in Rome, and the one hundred miles of practice laps all paid off in the end.[69] I asked 20 people if they had ever seen the movie. Half of them had, though most admitted it had been a long time ago. All but one, whether they had seen the film or not, mentioned the chariot race.

In the film, the race took place in Antioch. In Rome, the chariot races were staged in Circus Maximus, the oldest and the largest circus in the Roman Empire. Situated in the long natural declavity just below the Palatine, its location was conducive for large crowds to watch the chariot races and games. With its impressive size and its stone and marble ordered tiers, with the obelisk of Rameses II from Heliopolis gracing the center, the splendor of the circus made a statement about the Roman Empire itself, which was Augustus' intent as he lavishly refurbished it.[70] Today it lay crumpled below a mass of building.

Chariot races and other spectacles, which included gladiatorial combat, wild animal hunts, staged naval battles and theater performances were as much a part of the ancient Roman culture as was slavery. As a sporting event, chariot racing dates back at least as far as the thirteenth century B.C. Archaeological finds in the Greek cities of Knossas, Mycenae, Tiryos and Pylos include hundreds of spoked wheels. The wheels themselves do not indicate that they were used for anything but warfare. It is from the fragments of pottery that we see two or more chariots engaged in a race. It is evident from the increasing use of racing motifs on mosaics, wall paintings and funeral art that there was an increased interest in chariot racing in the early imperial days of Rome.[71] During the reign of Augustus, chariot-racing was the greatest of the spectacles.[72]

Ancient sources are more diverse in their attitudes toward amphitheatre games than they were of chariot races. These games were about death and violence. Included in these games were gladiator fights, wild beast shows and

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[68] Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 127.

[69] Ibid., 134.

[70] John Pearson, *Arena: The Story of the Colosseum*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), 39.

[71] Dirk Bennett, "Chariot Racing in the Ancient World," *History Today*, Dec. 1997 v47 n12 p4 (8).

[72] Pearson, *Arena: The Story of the Colosseum*, 41.

the execution of prisoners and criminals. These culturally accepted displays of death might be difficult for us to understand today, but to the Roman, it was an expression of imperial power.[73] The wild beasts, which came from across the vast empire, the executions of criminals and prisoners, the seating arrangements and especially the attendance of the Emperor himself, were all status symbols for the Roman leaders.[74] But ancient writings by some of the educated elite are evidence that not all members of the society were in favor of the dehumanizing displays and what their popularity said about the society.[75]

Trained gladiators took an oath agreeing to be burned, bound, beaten or killed by the sword.[76] The best became heroes and were subjects of graffiti.[77] Some became trainers in gladiatorial schools, which, during imperial times, were controlled by the emperors. Some won and saved money and were in a position to eventually buy their freedom. Others, upon receiving their freedom, continued to fight for wages.[78]

The term "gladiator" came from the name of the roman sword, *gladius*. But not all gladiators fought with a sword, as can be seen in both *Gladiator* and *Spartacus*. Also evident in these films are different types of gladiators, distinguished by their particular types of armor. The armor and the fighting method associated a gladiator with his homeland.[79]

Most gladiators were slaves, criminals, or prisoners-of-war, but some gladiators were freedmen who volunteered to be gladiators, maybe for the fame and excitement. Some lower classes of free men, probably motivated by monetary needs, also became gladiators.[80] Tombstone markings indicate that a surprising number of gladiators were Roman citizens.[81] Roman laws prohibited the upper class from appearing in the arena.[82] Dio Cassius apologized that he could give an eyewitness account of an event where the emperor Commodus disregarded this law. Cassius explained that it was in fear of his life that he attended. He reported what he saw and how he mimicked the

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[73] Janet Huskinson, "Looking for Culture, Identity and Power," *Experiencing Rome,* Janet Huskinson, ed., (London: Routledge, 2000), 9 [2-17].

[74] Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.

[75] Huskinson, "Looking for Culture, Identity and Power," 10.

[76] Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators,*107.

[77]Barbara F. McManus, *Arena: Gladiatorial Games*, The College of New Rochelle: 1999. http://www.vroma.org/%Ebmcmanus/aarena.html

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 106-107.

[82] Ibid., 102.

other spectators by cheering and applauding when Commodus ostentatiously appeared at the games, or more appalling, when he appeared *in* the games.[83]

Chariot drivers and gladiators became public heroes, yet at the same time, were despised for their lower status. So when Commodus chose to drive chariots and, even worse, to fight gladiators publicly, he brought disdain upon himself and disgrace to the office of Emperor.[84]

The movie *Gladiator* takes place during the reign of Commodus. The story is about the title character, Maximus, and his clash with the emperor. Maximus is the hero, a Roman general who falls into slavery after the death of Marcus Aurelius, for whom he has served. Commodus is the natural born son of Marcus Aurelius. In the film, Aurelius has decided to name Maximus as his successor. Commodus, aware of his father's intent, kills him and orders the death of Maximus. Maximus escapes and returns to his home, only to find that his wife and child have been murdered. He is later taken captive and forced to become a gladiator slave. In this film, the emphasis is more on gladiatorial games than on slavery.

Gladiatorial fights are believed to have begun in 264 B.C. as funerary games, when three pairs of gladiators fought until death at the funeral of Junius Brutus.[85] Originally the matches were held in open spaces, but with their increased popularity and frequency, a permanent structure was needed. In Rome, Circus Maximus was often used, but eventually a building was designed just for this type of spectacle.[86]

In 80 A.D., the Flavian Ampitheater, named after the Flavian dynasty, had a grand opening that was the longest organized massacre in history. According to Suetonius, Emperor Titus and an audience enhanced by the presence of Senators, court officials and priests packed the arena to watch the large-scale slaughter of men and animals for one hundred days.[87]

The building of the arena had begun during the imperial reign of Vespasian, who was determined to restore Rome to its "ancient splendor" after the fires of his despised predecessor Nero. The massive arena would symbolize the sense of order and power of the Flavians.[88]

Nero's Golden House had occupied the site previously, and it took six years to drain the lake, prepare the elephantine foundation and raise the walls. The

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[83] Menen, Aubrey, *Cities in the Sand*, (New York: Dial Press, 1973) 122; Pearson, *Arena: The Story of the Colosseum*, 141-2.

[84] Menen, *Cities in the Sand,* 121.

[85] Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 5.

[86] McManus, *Arena: Gladiatorial Games.*

[87] Pearson, *Arena: The Story of the Colosseum,* 7.

[88] Ibid.

arena was completed during the reign of Vespasian's son and successor Titus. As emperor, Titus financed the outlandish spectacle that named and bequeathed the amphitheater. The arena was his gift to the Roman people. The spectacle was his responsibility, his privilege and it was to assure that his fame and that of the Flavians would live through the annals of time.[89]

In actuality, the arena remained but the Flavian name has been erased from the contemporary mind. Ironically, it was his rancorous predecessor that was responsible for the usurpation. Nero had built his colossal statue near the site of the arena. Rather than destroy it, Vespasian lobbed off its head and replaced it with the head of the sun god Apollo. It was from this colossus that the amphitheater got its immutable name, the Colosseum.[90]

Recreating the Colosseum, with its "marvel of design, construction, and engineering," was the greatest challenge for the producers of *Gladiator*. The challenge was met by constructing a portion of the amphitheater, then using computer imaging to produce the remainder of the structure. The theater was filled with 2,000 cheering extras who were joined by 33,000 computer generated spectators.[91]

It was in this replica of the Colosseum that Maximus becomes a hero after a grueling fight with several other gladiators. He, without armor, is the last to fight another man with helmet and chest covering. Maximus defeats the other gladiator and disarms him of his sword. He shoves this sword, then his own into the chest of his opponent, who remains standing. Then in one rapid movement, he draws both swords from the man and in a cross-armed movement, chops off his head. The body and head drop to the ground. Maximus drops one sword, then throws the other into the crowd, which topples a small table. Maximus looks up at the crowd, which has become silent. "Are you not entertained?" he shouts. "Are you not entertained? Is that not why you are here?" To emphasize his disgust he spits on the ground, then turns to leave the arena. The crowd begins to cheer him. Maximus has become their hero.

Becoming a crowd favorite was advantageous in the arena. A wounded gladiator could concede defeat and his destiny was in the hands of the game sponsor. Emperors, to show a willingness to share their absolute power, were swayed by the attitudes of the audience who expressed their wishes by using

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[89] ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Diana Landau, ed., *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic*, (New York: Newmarket Press, 2000), 81-89.

thumbs up or thumbs down gestures, though there is some controversy whether thumbs up meant "to kill" or "to spare."[92]

Before Ridley Scott was given the script for *Gladiator,* he was given a copy of French artist Jean-Leon Gerome's 1872 painting *Pollice Verso* ("Thumbs Down"). It "spoke to me," says Scott, "of the Roman Empire in all its glory and wickedness."[93] Included in his modern epic is one suspenseful scene where Commodus goes against his own desires and, to please the crowd, spares the life of his antagonist, after Maximus is defeated by another gladiator.

Like Spartacus, Maximus is trained to be a gladiator in a distant province of Rome. Like Spartacus, he meets his death at the hand of his Roman antagonist. But unlike Spartacus, Maximus brings down his evil enemy in the arena. It is with the defeat of Commodus that the audience might believe there is hope for the end of imperial rule, that Rome will become a Republican government once again and enjoy a greater freedom.[94] Maximus' triumph parallels Ben Hur's victory over Messala in the chariot race.

The makers of *Gladiator* used a technique that would make the film more of an action-adventure than a historical commentary. They based the film on a fictitious character, then enriched it with characters and events from history. Robert Toplin refers to this technique as "faction."[95]

The character of Maximus is mostly Hollywood invention though there is some resemblance to Septimius Severus, who claimed to be Marcus Aurelius's son and became emperor several months after the death of Commodus. Roman legions did fight the fierce Germanic tribes of the southern borders of northern Europe, as shown in the film's opening scenes. Marcus Aurelius, an intelligent and respected Roman leader, did die during the Danubian wars and was succeeded by his megalomaniac son, Commodus. Commodus' sister Lucilla did conspire, unsuccessfully, with senators, to bring about her brother's murder. Commodus did, indeed, enter the ring at the Roman Colosseum to ostentatiously spar with gladiators. He was not murdered by a heroic gladiator, however, but by a paid wrestler who had been sent to kill him.[96]

Though Spartacus was not an invented character, most historical films, including *Ben-Hur* and *Gladiator,* will use fictitious principle characters. Invented situations will dominate the foreground. Historical figures and events will be blended into the story but will appear principally in the background. This method

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[92] Wiedemann *Emperors and Gladiators*, 120; McManus *Arena: Gladiatorial Games.*

[93] Landau, *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic*, 22, 26.

[94] Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood,* 93.

[95] Ibid., 94.

[96] Ibid.

of film-making will be less scrutinized by historians and less criticized for historical liberties.[97]

Unlike a documentary, which presents raw data, a motion picture is an interpretation and presents a particular point of view.[98] Films that present a strong point of view are more apt to catch the attention of the audience and to arouse its emotions.[99] Every scene is designed to draw the gaze of the viewer to the center of interest of that part of the story.[100] To make the hero more heroic, moviemakers often emphasize friction and dramatize the contrast between the hero and the villain by making the villain more evil.[101]

Spartacus, *Ben Hur* and *Gladiator* all tell their stories from the hero's point of view. Rome is cast as the villain. Each story puts Rome at a disadvantage because neither Rome nor its leaders are allowed a point of view. From watching such films, one cannot know what it must have been like to be a Roman citizen, or especially a Roman leader during these times. One cannot begin to understand the complicated inner workings of such a vastly influential political power as that of Ancient Rome. That was not the intent of the filmmakers. Their intent was to make a hero out of the hero and to win audience approval. The motion picture industry is, after all, a business that specializes in entertainment.

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[97] Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood,* 94.
[98] Sorlin, *The Film in History: Re-staging the Past,* 9.
[99] Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood,* 34.
[100] Sorlin, *The Film in History: Re-staging the Past,* xi.
[101] Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood,* 12-13.