CHAPTER NINE

Gladiator and Contemporary American Society

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Gladiator opened on Friday, May 5, 2000, which was also my birthday. So it was something of a celebration when several of my students and I arrived at the brand-new local movie theater for the film's first showing. The impact of *Gladiator* in that huge, glossy, luxurious Colosseum of a theater is unforgettable: plush love-seat-style rows stacked vertically in a sheer rise of tiers; the pounding state-of-the-art sound system that rendered every shout and whisper, every slash and stab, into an extra-sensory auditory experience, as if we were witnessing real combat: "Brothers, what we do in life echoes in eternity" – and in THX. And not to forget the upscale fare of cappuccino and cheesecake, the modern spectators' equivalents of rich and decadent "Roman imperial tidbits," and, of course, the steep metropolitan ticket prices.[1] But as Maximus might have shouted to our eager provincial crowd: "Are you not entertained?" Of course we were! "Is that not why you are here?" Yes, it was! So began an intense love-affair between me and *Gladiator* or, to be more precise, a *ménage à multiplex*. We in the audience were magically transformed into the Roman mob, breathless with excitement and roaring for more thrilling diversions. We had become Romans, those ancient people both alluring and alarming to Americans.

1 The quotation is from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979), directed by Terry Jones. Brian works a snack concession at a provincial Roman arena and sells excessively exotic foods.

The opening of *Gladiator* initiated a sudden resurrection of toga films after thirty-six years in disgrace and exile. But exciting as it is for fans of epic movies, the film prompts the question about its significance today. In his discussion of how history is employed in films as a subtle device to express the present, film historian Pierre Sorlin puts the question this way: "What did the film-makers or their audiences expect from a return to the past?"[2] *Gladiator* is a product of its makers' personal vision and an act of their creative will; yet the film's achievement in speaking to contemporary society reflects something that society desires or needs to hear. The epic genre is exceptionally well suited for this: "The film epic has taken up one of the most ancient art-forms and propelled it into the present day covered in twentieth-century ambitions, anxieties, hopes and fantasies."[3] *Gladiator* has become part of our cultural consciousness, and its financial and artistic success continues to inspire popular entertainment, including a throng of upcoming epics. So it is important to explore its contemporary relevance and the way modern American audiences identify themselves with the Romans in their respective arenas. As screenwriter David Franzoni has said: "The movie is about us. It's not just about ancient Rome, it's about America."[4] Like General Maximus' soldiers, "lean and hungry" and ready to do battle at his command, the American audience of the early twenty-first century is listening and responding to the issues *Gladiator* raises. If we are the Romans, then the film is a sign of our own time. *Gladiator* tells our story.

1. *A New Epic*

Any interpretation of *Gladiator* must take into account its relationship to the Roman epics made in Hollywood in the 1950s and early 1960s. It is fair to inquire why the long-defunct genre was revived at all. Like the earlier films, *Gladiator* reinvents ancient Rome, the city of power, intrigue, cruelty, and lust, and the ultimate symbol of both the sublime and the corrupt, and exhibits our own desires and doubts. In the spirit of those mid-century epics, *Gladiator* re-creates and adapts what Peter

2 Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1980), 208.

3 Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge, 1984), 1.

4 This and my later quotations from Franzoni are taken from an interview with John Soriano for the Writers Guild of America, published electronically at *http://www.wga.org/craft/interviews/franzoni2001.html*.

Bondanella has called "the myth of Rome" in order to express and examine contemporary social and political concerns:

> The myth is not so much a relic to be venerated as it is a flexible and limitless source of self-expression, a common heritage which has met the needs of successive generations . . . Something in the myth of Rome has helped us to understand our human condition, our world, and ourselves.[5]

Yet three and a half decades after the last chariot wheel came to a standstill in Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), *Gladiator*, with its unexpected popularity and profits, offers the public a different kind of film. *Gladiator* is more overtly aware of its own involvement in manipulating and retelling the myth of Rome. The announcement of Cassius, the emcee in the Colosseum ("On this day we reach back to hallowed antiquity to bring you a re-creation of the second fall of mighty Carthage"), highlights what epic film itself is engaged in doing. Moreover, state-of-the-art computer technology allowed the creators of *Gladiator* to display the previously buried images of Roman spectacle on an unprecedented scale. In this way, "Rome can be built in a day" after all.[6] But special effects and brazen self-consciousness alone cannot explain the astonishing success of *Gladiator*.

At a time when critics of the American film industry claimed that there was a dearth of new ideas, when remakes of old war horses and frequent replications of the tried and true ruled the box office, *Gladiator* dared to go beyond an opportunistic reproduction of a seemingly obsolete genre. Instead, it wove together some of the most intelligent, provocative, and entertaining aspects of those earlier epics. Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951) had been a campy riot of color and sound, with delightfully debauched characters scheming and seducing their way through fabulous orgies on the Palatine and dramatically staged martyrdoms in the arena. On the other hand, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, a dignified epic set in the same period as *Gladiator*, attempted to achieve solemnity and to portray the greatness of Roman culture, but it may have gone too far in neglecting the flashy, crowd-pleasing features that audiences had come to anticipate from Roman extravaganzas. The film was instead judged to be somber, even tedious, and was often blamed for the collapse of the entire epic genre, together with Joseph L.

5 Peter Bondanella, *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 1.

6 Herbert Muschamp, "Throwing Our Anxieties to the Lions," *The New York Times* (April 30, 2000), section 2A, pages 1 and 33; quotation at 1.

Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* of the year before. But *Gladiator* managed to unite these two cinematic approaches. Director Ridley Scott grew up watching these and other legendary epic films and so was well aware of the need to update this classic genre to win contemporary audiences: "I loved the costume drama of it all and remembered that world vividly. But I also knew you can't bring that to bear today. You've got to reinvent it."[7] So he and his writers and crew combined the spectacular decadence and imperial intrigue from earlier films with the sober narrative of an appealing hero's tragic journey along the lines of Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), all of it enhanced by computer technology. As a result, *Gladiator* delivers a compelling new kind of film: enjoyable, impressive-looking, and moving. As Scott said before filming started: "I hope to design the film in such a way that when people see it, they'll think, 'Gee, Rome's never been done like *this* before.' . . ."[8]

Just as those earlier epics used ancient Rome to address issues relevant to mid-twentieth-century America, *Gladiator*, too, functions as an allegory of its time and evokes themes and concerns unique to contemporary American society. It provides a new critical tool for the exploration of recent debates in American politics and culture. Scholars of classical antiquity and cinema have elucidated how the earlier films ambiguously invited American audiences both to distance themselves from and to identify themselves with the spectacle of Roman power, luxury, and superiority. The process of projection offered in those mid-century films was complex in that Rome, presented as a corrupt oppressor, troubled and repelled post-war viewers, while Rome in its self-confident and materially comfortable aspects attracted favor in the consumer-oriented economy of the time.[9] But as the first Roman epic made after the end of the Cold War, *Gladiator* arrived in an altogether different social and political world. As such, the film introduces a new and extraordinary problem of interpretation. Its prologue, set against a sepia-toned background and with haunting female vocals as its only accompaniment, informs us rather

7 Quoted from Richard Corliss, "*Gladiator*: The Empire Strikes Back," *Time* (May 8, 2000), 83–4, at 83.

8 Quoted from Paul M. Sammon, *Ridley Scott* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1999), 130.

9 Cf. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Maria Wyke, "Introduction," in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 1–22, at 6–13; further Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 23–32. On tensions in the modern identification with Rome see in particular William Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie," in *Imperial Projections*, 23–49, especially 24–8.

portentously that Rome is "at the height of its power." The American spectators in the year 2000, supremely confident and unencumbered by doubts about their country's geo-political dominance, experience not an indecisive tug or a double-sided connection with ancient Rome but rather a shock of recognition. The Romans depicted in *Gladiator* undeniably stand in for us; the film is "a meditation on the perplexity of the world's sole surviving superpower."[10] Such bewilderment is represented by two very distinct depictions of Rome, as *Gladiator* poses the very question of the direction and purpose of American cultural and political hegemony.

The main theme of the film is the conflict between two competing visions of what kind of superpower Rome – or, by analogy, America – should be. *Gladiator* takes us to a world completely conquered by Roman military might. "There is no one left to fight, sire," General Maximus tells Emperor Marcus Aurelius. But the worldwide spread of the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, does not extend to Rome itself. Rather, Rome is on the verge of a breakdown under increasing pressure from within, as two opposing sides clash in an ideological battle between totalitarian oppression, epitomized by the wicked new emperor Commodus, and a just and noble republicanism, embodied by Maximus and a senatorial conspiracy against Commodus.[11] In an ingenious plot turn, *Gladiator* introduces the improbable objective of restoring the Roman republic in A.D. 180 and allows this fantasy to represent Good in its everlasting conflict against Evil.[12] Earlier films traditionally made Rome the imperialistic oppressor of implausibly virtuous and racially harmonious groups, the most common narrative formula being the subjugation of Christians, Hebrews, or slaves. *Spartacus* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* focused on Roman political factions in their examination of the corrupting influence of power. But *Gladiator* presents an imaginative new development by casting the Roman Empire as the oppressor of its true self, the republic.

Thus the conflict between Maximus and Commodus is a battle for Rome's very soul, as each tries to define his idea of Rome on his own

10 Muschamp, "Throwing Our Anxieties to the Lions," 1.

11 For echoes of republican Roman values in the film see Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 2nd edn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 94–5. Cf. also below.

12 On the Roman republic as a good Rome and the empire as an evil one see Martin M. Winkler, "*Star Wars* and the Roman Empire," in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 272–90, at 273–80. Cf. Bondanella, *The Eternal City*, 4–5.

terms. Maximus' dream of a republican Rome, in which family farmers become soldiers only when necessary to fight genuine external enemies, is set against Commodus' spectacle of a Rome whose staged battles mask the internal erosion of an empire. In a demonstration of the Roman Empire's military strength and limitless power, professional gladiators engage in mock warfare with women and animals in the arena, diverting the mindless mob into a blithe state of numbness and oblivion to the struggles for control that are going on upstairs in the marble "corporate" boxes.[13] "I will give the people a vision of Rome," promises Commodus, "and they'll love me for it." Soon the bloodthirsty crowd demands ever more stunning and bizarre entertainment. "He will bring them death," observes Senator Gracchus, "and they will love him for it." The key question – whether or not we should identify with the Romans – *Gladiator* answers with a resounding affirmative. But the film adds a subtle new twist when it speculates on which vision of Rome, or America, will ultimately prevail.

2. *The Rebirth of Rome*

Gladiator offers overwhelming evidence of its successful response to the American cultural consciousness. The film has generated a revival of the epic genre and a resurgence of interest in classical studies in popular literature, art, and classrooms across America. But in June of 1998, the creative forces behind *Gladiator* knew they were taking a great risk. Then DreamWorks' production head Walter Parkes noted a trend in the box-office success of recent "classic" films like James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) and thought it was time for a rebirth of the toga film: "The Roman epic occupies a strange, special place in the heart of moviegoers. We love the good ones like *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*, but even the bad ones are guilty pleasures."[14] Scott, however, had to be persuaded into taking the helm of the film. He was presented with a reproduction of the painting *Pollice Verso* (1872) by Jean-Léon Gérôme, in which a victorious gladiator stands over fallen foes in an arena crowded with rabid spectators, and he was inspired by the dramatic and visual possibilities of a gladiator epic that would tap into contemporary

13 Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997; rpt. 2000), 44–51, examines the political importance of the imperial games.

14 Quoted from Corliss, "*Gladiator*," 83.

social issues.[15] As Sorlin observed: "The main advantage of history is that it allows people to describe the present time in a free, imaginary way."[16] *Gladiator* had all the promise to be a major summer blockbuster for a public eager to see a recognizable yet original image of ancient Rome. On its opening weekend (May 5–7, 2000), it grossed more than the next seven films combined. In spring of 2001, *Gladiator* earned five Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actor for Russell Crowe.

Modern cinematic techniques and special effects update the epic narrative of *Gladiator* and present a fresh reconstruction of Roman antiquity. The initial battle sequence in Germania recalls the turmoil of the Normandy invasion in Steven Spielberg's World War II drama *Saving Private Ryan* (1998): "It's a bravura sequence . . . that doesn't copy *Private Ryan*'s famous opening tour de force of carnage so much as raise a banner in admiration."[17] All the fight sequences in *Gladiator* represent a breathtaking technical advance upon the combat scenes of earlier epics, which used to be filmed mainly in a single wide-angle shot "like a ballet," in Scott's words.[18] The main setting in the city of Rome was an impressive replica of the Colosseum that cost over $1 million and took months to build. In an appropriate metaphor for the way the film combines and reprocesses earlier images of Rome with contemporary technology, the lower two tiers of the model were constructed at full scale – about forty percent of the original four tiers that were 157 feet high – and the rest was added by computer. There is a striking moment when the provincial gladiators enter the Colosseum for their first fight and are staggered by its sheer immensity as the roar of 50,000 spectators envelops them. The film audience follows their stunned eyes as they sweep upward to the last tier of that marvelous feat of human imagination and engineering, both ancient and modern. "I didn't know men could build such things," declares the Nubian Juba, as awe-struck as we are.

15 Cf. Chris Nashawaty, "Chairman of the Sword," *Entertainment Weekly* (May 12, 2000), 26–31, at 26–7. *Gladiator: The Making of the Ridley Scott Epic*, ed. Diana Landau (New York: Newmarket, 2000), 24–5, reproduces the painting, about which Scott has said: "That image spoke to me of the Roman Empire in all its glory and wickedness" (*Gladiator*, 26).

16 Sorlin, *The Film in History*, 209.

17 Lisa Schwarzbaum, "Fight Club," *Entertainment Weekly* (May 12, 2000), 47–8, at 47.

18 Quoted from Nashawaty, "Chairman of the Sword," 30.

3. *The New Romans*

The figure of Maximus, the fictional protagonist of *Gladiator*, prompts the question about what kind of heroism the film wants its audiences to accept. Its tag-line is "A Hero Will Rise," but what kind of hero is Maximus? Some critics suggested that the character of Maximus reaches back to an idea of masculine bravery and goodness that is old-fashioned by both modern and ancient standards. One reviewer described him as "a brother-in-attitude" of the quietly dignified Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan*: "They're decent men forced by circumstance to perform extraordinary feats."[19] Jon Solomon has suggested a comparison with the farmer-turned-general Cincinnatus, "an early Roman exemplar of nobility."[20] Like him, Maximus wants to return to his farm after the fighting. It is not surprising that Maximus displays old-fashioned virtues. In this film, the historical Roman republic serves to represent the same powerful retro glamour and gilded integrity that "the greatest generation" of World War II fighters now does for Americans. *Gladiator* invites us, as do the democratic-minded Romans in the film, to view Maximus in the soft, admiring light of nostalgia. Franzoni has remarked on the appeal of his Roman hero to contemporary Americans: "We're stewing in self-indulgent mediocrity, and here's a noble figure who's almost swallowed up by the Roman equivalent, and he endures." Others have asserted that the depiction of Maximus improves upon the conventional Hollywood action hero by offering a more psychologically substantive character; they imply that modern sensibilities require a hero of greater sensitivity and emotional depth: "I think our idea of what an action hero is has changed," said Joaquin Phoenix, who plays Commodus. "Now we care about heroes with flaws and humanity."[21] Maximus' character responds to our tendency to romanticize the rugged heroes of the past, infusing them with personality traits that expose and emphasize their sentiments and imperfections.

Certain unusual aspects of Maximus' humanity might appear rather disturbing to modern viewers, principally his tragic self-consciousness, his single-minded focus on bloody revenge, and his gloomy preoccupation with his mortality. Maximus demonstrates all the furious rage, brooding menace, and pitiless aggression of a whole history of insulted heroes from Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* to Mad Max in George Miller's

19 Schwarzbaum, "Fight Club," 47.

20 Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 94.

21 Quoted from Nashawaty, "Chairman of the Sword," 30.

apocalyptic film trilogy. On the surface, Maximus seems to owe much to Kubrick's Spartacus. Both are gladiators turned into heroic leaders who fight for their own freedom and that of their enslaved brothers-at-arms against an autocratic and corrupt Roman government. Like Spartacus, proud Maximus is subjected to humiliation and brutality in the arena. Both die virtually sacrificial deaths in a daring effort to achieve their goals, a fate rarely visited upon Hollywood action heroes. Yet the freedom-fighter Spartacus believes unconditionally in the justice of his struggle to liberate his people. Maximus, however, is an unwilling savior, one who initially refuses to take on the role Marcus Aurelius intends to bestow on him, that of a protector who will return Rome to senate rule. When the old and weary emperor asks him: "Won't you accept this great honor that I have offered you?" Maximus answers: "With all my heart, no." "Maximus," the emperor sighs, "that is why it must be you." At the beginning, Maximus confidently articulates his faith in the ideal of Rome despite Marcus Aurelius' frustration over his succession, but soon Maximus is forced to realize that this ideal does not exist.

Although he embodies the values and virtues of republican Rome, Maximus is a reluctant instrument in all the political maneuvering and only decides to assist the revolt against Commodus out of a sense of personal outrage. In this, he resembles Judah Ben-Hur in William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), who is driven by his bitter quarrel with the Roman tribune Messala, once his intimate boyhood friend. Like Maximus, Judah is brutalized and enslaved by the Roman system, loses his family, and seeks vengeance against the man who had injured him and them. Both heroes play out their personal revenge in the arena in scenes of extreme violence that show not a shred of forgiveness. Judah beats Messala in the famous chariot race, and Maximus slays Commodus in a bloody duel. Judah is ultimately redeemed and his family is restored to him by the grace of Jesus, but, before, his destiny had been shaped by his adoptive Roman father, the consul Quintus Arrius. In a similar way, Marcus Aurelius is Maximus' surrogate father. "You are the son that I should have had," the emperor tells his favorite general, and Maximus, about whose parents the film says nothing, calls him "father" in several scenes. Yet it is only in the arena, when he realizes that he is about to die, that Maximus accepts his political duty out of love and respect for the memory of his imperial father figure. "There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized," he commands. "These are the wishes of Marcus Aurelius." For Maximus, the ideal of the Good Rome is inextricably bound to his filial relationship with Marcus and underscored by his old-fashioned idea that Roman power can be a just and positive force in

the world. For the heroes of earlier epic films, the concept of Rome itself was linked to the role of paternal figures: "Rome is the name for the unrequited desire for an authority that would restore the public world to these anachronistic men."[22] In keeping with this perspective, actor Russell Crowe had to be talked into donning breastplate and sword. After reading an early version of the script, he was not happy with its "semi-cynical take on life in ancient times."[23]

The interactions of various others with Maximus reveal a range of problematic, broken, and often reconfigured familial bonds that suggests a parallel to contemporary American concerns and criticisms about the collapse of the nuclear family. Domestic affairs take on a conspicuously modern tenor. At the beginning, Marcus Aurelius presides over the simmering tensions that finally break out between his son Commodus and his chosen heir Maximus. He justifies his choice thus: "Commodus is not a moral man." *Gladiator* follows the convention of earlier epic films in complicating the father figure, for whose affection and attention his "sons" must compete in a dangerous, often deadly, struggle. Unstable Commodus is desperate for the love and approval of Marcus, who withholds it from him but acknowledges: "Your fault as a son is my failure as a father." Commodus only receives the paternal embrace he has longed for when he strangles Marcus to death. When Maximus accuses him of the murder in a scene that sets up their final fight, Commodus transfers his lethal embrace to Maximus and stabs him with a poisoned knife in the back, whispering in his ear: "You loved my father, I know. But so did I. That makes us brothers, doesn't it?" This moment builds on an earlier awkward embrace after the battle in Germania, when Commodus first calls Maximus "brother" and incurs an agonizing pang of jealousy over his father's display of favoritism toward Maximus.

As evil young Commodus, Joaquin Phoenix avoids the archetype of the effeminate Roman tyrant. He plays the autocrat coming unhinged with petulant perversity. When confronted with Maximus' enduring popularity, he whines elegantly, in one of the film's most often-repeated lines: "It vexes me . . . I'm terribly vexed." Commodus' insecurity and cruelty betray a very modern psychological motivation as the result of his having been "an unloved child with vivid plans for vengeance."[24] As an adult, Commodus harbors vicious fantasies of hurting others to assuage his own emotional pain. His depravity arises from his twisted

22 Fitzgerald, "Oppositions, Anxieties, and Ambiguities in the Toga Movie," 45.
23 Quoted from Nashawaty, "Chairman of the Sword," 29.
24 Corliss, "*Gladiator*," 84.

and unsuccessful need to form family bonds with others. When Senator Gracchus questions his limited experience of the Roman people, Commodus airily, and eerily, counters: "I call it love, Gracchus. The people are my children, I am their father. I shall hold them to my bosom and embrace them tightly." Commodus' incestuous cravings for his elder and politically more mature sister Lucilla also indicate his search for maternal affection. He curls up next to her in the fetal position and longs for the peaceful security enjoyed by her son Lucius: "He sleeps so well because he is loved." But Commodus has no true understanding of love. When Lucilla does not respond to his creepy overtures, and when he discovers that she is at the heart of the plot to depose him, he attributes the loss of her devotion, like his father's, to the interference of Maximus. As Lucilla explains to Maximus: "My brother hates all the world and you most of all." Maximus assents: "Because your father chose me." But Lucilla corrects him: "No. Because my father loved you. And because I loved you." The more love Maximus finds, the less Commodus gets. In one of the film's most astonishing updates of epic genre conventions, even the wicked tyrant is not totally unsympathetic. His main defect is that he lacks his family's love.

So far there has been little comment on Lucilla, perhaps not surprisingly, since hers is the only female speaking part in the entire film: "As happens in such muscle-bound extravaganzas, Lucilla appears to be the only woman residing in all of the Eternal City."[25] But the portrayal of Lucilla resists the traditional good woman–bad woman polarity of earlier epics. She is neither a feline seductress, like Empress Poppaea in *Quo Vadis*, nor the pure Christian (or proto-Christian) maiden who becomes the male protagonist's redeemer, like Lygia in *Quo Vadis*, Diana in Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953), or Esther in *Ben-Hur*. Instead, *Gladiator* suggests a more nuanced portrayal of sexuality, power, femininity, and domesticity. Her on-screen precursor might be Elizabeth Taylor's incarnation of a sexually liberated and politically visionary Cleopatra. As was Cleopatra, so Lucilla is the one with natural talent and disposition for just rule, although their younger brothers are the ones in line for the throne. "If only you'd been born a man," her father tells Lucilla, "what a Caesar you would have made!" Both Cleopatra and Lucilla are mothers, fiercely protective and concerned for the political futures of their sons. Commodus explicitly compares Lucilla to Cleopatra in his "busy little bee" speech to Lucius: "Royal ladies behave very strangely and do very odd

25 Schwarzbaum, "Fight Club," 48.

things in the name of love." Lucilla's ability to instigate and guide the republican coup attempt reflects our contemporary attitudes about female political skills and our familiarity with women in positions of power, but the film also presents a modern view of the importance of family by highlighting Lucilla's maternal instincts.[26] The ruptures and dysfunctions in Lucilla's relationships create an emotional space for a temporary bond between her and Maximus, one that is imbued with both politics and eroticism. In this, too, *Gladiator* goes against earlier epics, in which the most powerful scenes tended to take place between male characters. Because Lucilla is different from the one-dimensional women of previous films, the scenes between her and Maximus are just as important to the narrative as any of his scenes with other males, if not more so in that Lucilla succeeds in convincing him of his responsibility to Rome. Moreover, because their lingering sexual desire for each other is expressed but not consummated, the scenes between Lucilla and Maximus maintain a palpable tension. Combining sensuality and domesticity with political intelligence, Lucilla responds to issues relevant to women in today's society who attempt to manage competing personal and professional roles and who, like her, accomplish this with varying degrees of success. Graceful Lucilla in her sleek costumes evokes the languid luxury and urban affluence of ancient Rome in a way that modern followers of fashion can appreciate.

Proximo, the owner and trainer of the gladiators who was freed by Marcus Aurelius, takes over the parental function left vacant by the old emperor's death. Maximus is surprised to find himself emotionally drawn to Proximo, who presides over his rebirth into his new public role. Proximo's rhetoric is permeated with the language of transitions and parenthood. "I shall be closer to you for the next few days, which will be the last of your miserable lives, than that bitch of a mother who first brought you screaming into this world!" he barks at his new purchases. "And just as your mother was there at your beginning, I shall be there at your end." Proximo is the unwitting midwife present at the birth of the hero Maximus. *Gladiator* permits an unconventional attachment to form between two initially opposed male characters and allows that bond to develop the theme of the protagonist's destiny.

The ways in which these reinvigorated ancient characters engage with one another respond to contemporary concerns about domestic and romantic relationships. As Russell Crowe has commented: "I'd be

26 Cf. Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 94.

surprised if I have a second movie that becomes as much a part of the zeitgeist."[27]

4. *Alienation*

Gladiator is a story of alienation. Maximus' disaffection with the idea of Rome offers a compelling analogy to the modern sense of estrangement from politics in all its corrupt irrelevance. Contemporary culture critics speak of "the crisis of confidence in American institutions" and point to several examples of popular media that exhibit "few convictions beyond pandering to viewers' feelings of superiority to all those bad people in Washington."[28] Maximus' journey of transition from general to slave to gladiator exemplifies such isolation from national or group identity, followed by a decisive turn toward pure self-interest. At the beginning, Maximus the general can fight for an ideal Rome because, never having been to the city, he has remained undefiled by its reality. Maximus demonstrates his patriotism and personal valor on the battlefield, and when he utters the army's motto "Strength and Honor," it is clear that he embodies these virtues. The opening scene illustrates the organization and corporate integrity of the Roman army. Maximus can conceive of no other idea of Rome than as rightful conqueror and civilizing force over the world. This idea is manifest to him in the cooperative spirit of his legions. The courage, commitment, and unity of the Roman soldiers make the idea of Rome a reality.

But soon Maximus is harshly awakened from his dream of Rome by Commodus' distorted imperial vision and loses all faith in the idea he had defended with his life. The scene in which he finds his wife and son murdered marks the moment of his alienation from everything he once valued. Maximus later scrapes off his flesh the insignia of the legions – SPQR: "The senate and people of Rome" – with a knife. Shortly after, the film cuts to the massive SPQR engraved on marble in Rome as Commodus holds his hollow victory parade. This is a visual equation indicating that Maximus now spills his own blood to reject what Rome has become under the new tyrant; he excises the Roman part of himself. Now a nameless slave, Maximus is loyal solely to his desire for revenge, and his

27 Quoted from Benjamin Svetkey, "Counting Crowes," *Entertainment Weekly* (January 4, 2002), 20–6, at 24.

28 James Poniewozik, "The Big Fat Year in Culture," *Time* (December 30, 2002–January 6, 2003), 141–53, at 145, and "No Coattails," *Time* (January 13, 2003), 58.

only community with the other gladiators is for the sake of survival in the arena. Like a modern urban gang, the gladiators form a brotherhood that develops a code of honor and organizes a system of allegiances but exists outside the law, alienated from any civil or social conventions.

Maximus' fighting skill and courage, once employed in the service of Rome's greatness, are now trivialized into bloody entertainment for the masses. As a visual symbol of this sudden degradation, the brave wolf-dog, who had accompanied Maximus into the opening battle as emblem of Rome's legendary and noble fighting spirit, has disappeared from the film and is briefly replaced by the leashed hyena in Proximo's tent. In the arena Maximus fights to stay alive, but he displays his contempt for the crowd by scowling and spitting on the sand. After one particularly gory show he even hurls his sword into the official viewing box of the local VIPs. Such moments emphasize Maximus' utter disillusion with the concept of Roman authority.

Maximus' alienation from a degenerate Rome and his deep-seated ambivalence about his role in restoring Roman government to the people suggests a parallel to post-Cold War America. Despite the temporary boost in the rhetoric of national unity and superficial displays of patriotism after September 11, 2001, current political and social commentators remark on the apathy of the American electorate, citing low voter turnout and a persistent lack of interest in political debate as evidence of the general disenfranchisement of individual Americans and the pervasive attitude that politics is a dirty game. Because of their profound hostility to and suspicion of the government in Washington, more and more Americans assume postures of self-interest. Maximus first lays eyes on Rome as a slave and feels nothing but revulsion at the corruption he sees. He eventually realizes what he has already begun to understand: "The mob is Rome." The disillusioned general, now turned free-agent hero, is driven by his anger and isolation to re-enact his ideal of Rome from within the arena.

5. *Athletics as Spectacle*

The transformation, even trivialization, of Maximus' military skill into gladiatorial entertainment also suggests a present analogy through the prominence of professional athletics in American popular culture and the cult of the celebrity athlete. Most superstar athletes are free agents, idolized by their admirers and celebrated by the media as individual icons separate from any team, further evidence of the trend toward alienation

from group or even corporate identities. These highly paid athletes are among the most influential figures in modern society, with the capacity to affect people in what they buy, eat, and wear on the strength of their commercial endorsements. Famous Roman gladiators, who also attained celebrity status through specialized types of fighting, were known to endorse products, too; some of these endorsements survive in ancient frescoes and wall graffiti. Ironically, the makers of *Gladiator* downplayed this historical angle on the assumption that modern audiences would not believe it.[29] Yet *Gladiator* evokes the influence of the superstar athlete in a child's wide-eyed worship of celebrity when young Lucius approaches Maximus, his new idol, as he waits in his cell to enter the arena. Lucius is about the same age as Maximus' dead son. In this poignant scene, a father without a son comes face to face with a son without a father. The moment even reminds us of current debates about professional athletes' responsibility to provide effective role models for America's youngsters.

The gladiatorial fights are reminiscent of the way in which contemporary sports competitions, especially professional football and wrestling, are filmed for television. *Gladiator* makes the combat scenes in the ancient arena visibly accessible to its viewers and connects the gladiatorial bouts explicitly with athletic events in modern ballparks and stadiums. Franzoni was conscious of the film's visual and thematic resonance with contemporary big-ticket professional sports: "This movie is about modern athletic contests, the power entertainment holds over the people and then in turn [is] exploited for the sake of power." Screenwriter John Logan contributed an emphasis on Maximus and his fellow gladiators as the objects of the Roman mob's ardent gaze. The camera watches from a series of vantage points that are easily recognizable to any viewers of Monday Night Football. Logan had written *Any Given Sunday* (1999) for director Oliver Stone, a story of corruption in the National Football League with a reference to an earlier epic film: The voluble head coach barks out his philosophy to his quarterback while the chariot race from *Ben-Hur* plays on his big-screen television in the background.[30] In *Gladiator*, the contests in the provincial arena in Zucchabar exhibit a number of sports camera angles, including a dramatic circular pan sweeping around Maximus and Juba, who are chained together for their first fight. But the Battle of Carthage evinces the most striking use of filming techniques honed at modern sports events. Several spectacular

29 Tricia Johnson, "Far From Rome," *Entertainment Weekly* (May 19, 2000), 8–9, at 9.
30 As noted by Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 25.

elements in this battle are intended to recall the opening sequence in Germania, and the reversal underscores the degradation of Maximus' military skills. The performance staged in the arena replaces the true glory of Rome. "The beating heart of Rome is not the marble of the senate," observes Senator Gracchus grimly, "it is the sand of the Colosseum."

For the Battle of Carthage, the gladiators enter the arena in a narrow shot from inside the athletes' tunnel or "chute," emerging in a camera view typical of televised sporting events. Like a modern general manager, Proximo watches through a broad horizontal slit in his box. The battle itself is shot from diverse angles familiar from television sports: from above the stadium, from end zones and sidelines, and from gladiatorial-helmet angles. The bird's-eye shots of the Colosseum in particular are an astounding sight, as if originating from a blimp hovering high above a modern sports arena. Later, a triumphant Maximus does a victory lap around the arena on a white horse, and the crowd goes wild with applause for the newcomers' unexpected win. The reversal in the Battle of Carthage – the Roman legions lose – parallels underdog sports films like David Anspaugh's *Hoosiers* (1986) and John Lee Hancock's *The Rookie* (2002), in which a downtrodden or disadvantaged team or individual is shown to succeed against all odds. Amid the sound of ecstatic fans chanting "Maximus!" the gladiators exit the arena in a wide-angle shot as if they were a victorious football team leaving the field. A close-up of Maximus' face reveals that look of pure satisfaction before an athlete is named his team's Most Valuable Player.

The connection between gladiatorial spectacle and sports events extends to the language appropriate to sports journalism in reviews of *Gladiator*. One critic described Maximus as if he were an underdog athlete: "He battles back through the gladiatorial bush leagues to become a blood sport superstar."[31] Another commented that the historical Commodus himself loved "to climb into the ring" as a gladiator: "His fights, however, were as fixed as an episode of *WWF Smackdown*!"[32] Some reviewers addressed contemporary anxieties about the amount of violence in popular entertainment and sports. One noted: "It has lots of fighting, but with a posh accent; this may be the first culturally acceptable version of WrestleMania."[33] The commercial success of *Gladiator*

31 Joe Morgenstern, "Crowe Sizzles As Rome Burns in Epic 'Gladiator'; An Empire Strikes Back," *The Wall Street Journal* (May 5, 2000), section W, pages 1 and 9; quotation at 1.
32 Johnson, "Far From Rome," 9.
33 Corliss, "*Gladiator*," 83.

can in part be attributed to its realistic and exciting depiction of physical action and violence in "the contemporary style of hyperrealism."[34] The film's glamorization of brutal force and conquest and their association with spectacle and scoreboard are directly evoked in the recent naming of a new team in the American Arena Football League: "The Gladiators." *Gladiator* is also inspiring Reality TV, which has lately taken on a distinctly Roman guise. On December 1, 2002, The Learning Channel presented "Chariot Race 2002" with an advertisement featuring a Russell Crowe look-alike standing arms akimbo in a chariot under the headline "The Original Action Hero" and with the tag: "Join four modern day competitors as TLC recreates the mother of all drag races." Long before "Survivor" and "Fear Factor," the ancient Romans were producing their own "reality entertainment" in packed arenas throughout the empire.

In a virtuoso twist of reciprocity, *Gladiator* is also influencing the way contemporary sports are shown on television. During the playoff games of the National Football League for the 2002 season, televised on network stations in January, 2003, the musical theme from *Gladiator* was used before commercial breaks and before and after half-time. A comparison of any football audience with the spectators in the ancient arena suggests that our sporting events are so enormous and extravagant that they equal or exceed the grandeur of the Romans. Thus the depiction of the Roman mob in *Gladiator* offers the American audience an unnerving mirror-image of themselves, eager to be entertained at all costs and demanding ever more intricate, dangerous, and realistic spectacles, as when the Colosseum emcee cries with familiar gusto: "Caesar is pleased to bring you the only undefeated champion in Roman history: Tigris of Gaul!"

6. *Back to Simple Values*

Another strong link between *Gladiator* and contemporary society is the current movement toward simplicity and the longing to return to the plain ideals of the mid-twentieth century and to a down-to-earth hearth and family. While American society may be eager to celebrate the simple values of past decades, the mocking and often exaggerated way this retro trend appears in popular culture shows that we are also reluctant to give up the irony and self-consciousness that has become "cool." Yet

34 Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 93.

Americans are wistful about the times when it was generally believed that an individual could achieve the American Dream through hard work and commitment to family, God, and country. Maximus, too, looks back to a time when the idea of Rome meant something decent, true, and easily comprehensible, not least in regard to the validity of empire. Loyal service to Rome had raised him from the fields of his farm to chief general of the legions, to victories for Rome on the field of honor, and to closest confidant of the emperor.

As Jon Solomon has observed: "*Gladiator* reveals another twenty-first-century bias. Contemporary Hollywood family values interject themselves into the ancient Roman zeitgeist."[35] The film principally explores the theme of a return to traditional ideals of home and family through Maximus, originally a farmer and so "a working-class hero."[36] "Dirt cleans off a lot easier than blood," he tells the senators. The ideal has special relevance for the American viewer familiar with Thomas Jefferson's veneration of his farm at Monticello and with his concept of the gentleman farmer as the archetype of American nobility and virtuous citizenship. When Marcus Aurelius asks Maximus after the battle in Germania: "Tell me about your home," Maximus delivers a sentimental speech about the simple beauty and tranquillity of his farm, with its fecund soil "black like my wife's hair." His wistful reverie evokes the modern individual's yearning for the simplicity of the land. Russell Crowe wrote this speech himself, drawing on his feelings of homesickness for his own ranch: "That's the way I feel about missing my home too."[37] Marcus Aurelius tells Maximus that his home is "worth fighting for" and thereby suggests that the protection of the small family farm is one of the purposes of Roman military conquest. The old emperor, beset by doubts about the legacy of his rule, has come to realize that the countryside, not the city, is the true Rome. Maximus' speech anticipates and fortifies his depiction as an old-fashioned man of the land in the rest of the film, one who has been brutally displaced. Maximus "has a farmer's vanity-free self-confidence."[38] He picks up a handful of dirt and smells it before each fight, drawing strength from his connection to the soil. Franzoni explained why: "We wanted a character trait that humanized the hero before battle . . . Some thought he did it when his life was in danger. But really, the impulse was, he does it when he's about

35 Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 93.

36 Corliss, "*Gladiator*," 84. This is a common feature in Scott's films, on which cf. Richard A. Schwartz, *The Films of Ridley Scott* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2001), 144–5.

37 Quoted from Nashawaty, "Chairman of the Sword," 31.

38 Schwarzbaum, "Fight Club," 48.

to kick ass." Maximus cannot lose as long as he keeps in contact with the earth.

This portrayal of Maximus as a simple man of the soil responds to modern society's idealization of the countryside and its supposed virtue and purity, in stark contrast to the crime-ridden metropolis. *Gladiator* recalls the spectacle of Roman corruption and debauchery lavishly presented in earlier toga epics that equated oppressive political power with social and sexual deviance. *Gladiator* also employs the image of transgressive sexuality to suggest moral depravity and the abuse of tyrannical power. Commodus reveals incestuous yearnings for Lucilla, connecting his aberrant desires with his despotic plans for Rome. His perverse sexuality parallels the bisexuality of Crassus in *Spartacus*, which indicated "aristocratic promiscuity and political rapacity."[39]

By contrast, Maximus honors his wife and remains celibate – to the considerable exasperation of Crowe's female fans. *Gladiator* shows Maximus and Lucilla negotiating the tricky boundaries of their past relationship. Only when Maximus lies dying in her arms are the former lovers almost restored to being a couple, since, like a good husband, he has provided her with security for herself and her son ("Lucius is safe"). So, through Maximus the old-fashioned soldier, gentleman farmer, and faithful Roman husband and father, *Gladiator* reaffirms the ideals of family and simplicity.

Maximus is also a man of personal spirituality. By representing Maximus, devoted father and husband, as someone who honors his household gods in the manner of a traditional Roman *paterfamilias*, the head of the family, the film combines "modern familial sensitivity and ancient Roman Republican virtues."[40] This spirituality seems to acknowledge the present movement toward alternative and individualized religious expression and a concurrent disaffection with the structures and strictures of institutional religions. *Gladiator* effectively contrasts the arrogance and hedonism of imperial Rome with the genuine religiosity of the individual. Franzoni wanted a hero who "transcends traditional religious morality"; as he put it: "I believe there is room in our mythology for a character who is deeply moral, but who's not traditionally religious." Maximus encourages his troops to fight bravely until the final moment with the promise of a peaceful and painless transition to the world beyond: "And if you find yourself alone, riding

39 Alison Futrell, "Seeing Red: Spartacus as Domestic Economist," in *Imperial Projections*, 77–118; quotation at 105.

40 Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema*, 95.

through green fields with the sun on your face, do not be troubled, for you are in Elysium, and you are already dead!"

Popular interest in the afterlife, in particular the possibility of contact with the spirits of one's family or friends, is prevalent in American popular culture. This is readily apparent in films with a protagonist who grapples with his indissoluble connection to his dead wife, as in Tom Shadyac's *Dragonfly* (2002) or Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris* (2002). These two films, and comparable examples on television, highlight the unbreakable spiritual bonds among family and friends. What they have in common is the theme of reunion and the belief that our loved ones are accessible to us after death. Maximus' conversation with Juba about his dead family evokes the Roman concept of the afterlife but also resonates with the modern idea or hope that the souls of our loved ones exist where they can still communicate with us. The loss of his family is the single most powerful force that motivates Maximus, and the viewers' feeling of assurance that he will be reunited with them after his death gives the film a kind of positive resolution. Lucilla closes Maximus' eyes and tells him: "Go to them . . . you're home." Yes, you *can* go home again.

Maximus' loneliness and sense of impending catastrophe mirror the condition of Rome itself, as the viewers are shown an empire poised on the brink of crisis and collapse. This is consistent with the growing appeal of apocalyptic theology in mainstream American churches and even among secular Americans, in particular after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As a critic has observed about the anxious mood in contemporary America:

> There are times in human history when instinct, faith, myth and current events work together to create a perfect storm of preoccupation. Visions of an end point lodge in people's minds in many forms, ranging from entertainment to superstitious fascination to earnest belief. Now seems to be one of those times.[41]

There is now a widespread demand for "apocalyterature" that provides evidence that the current fascination with the concept of "the End Times" is not a fringe phenomenon. The extraordinary success of the *Left Behind* series of books and films based on the mysterious prophecies in the biblical Book of Revelation points to the need of many to be reassured by divine providence that they will not be lost amid moral decay and cul-

41 Nancy Gibbs, "Apocalypse Now," *Time* (July 1, 2002), 40–8, at 45.

tural breakdown. Even beyond the realm of such believers, apocalyptic fervor has been infusing the American public. "What we do in life echoes in eternity," Maximus proclaims to his men. Three years after becoming a popular quotation, these words are beginning to take on added meaning.

7. *The Exhaustion of Empire*

Marcus Aurelius looks wearily around the frozen battlefield, notes the calculated late arrival of Commodus, and sighs: "So much for the glory of Rome." On his face we can see what an absolute empire has come to: from an opportunity for positive change in the world to the responsibility for that world and, in turn, the recognition of the burdens imposed by imperial obligation, all resulting in inescapable exhaustion. Social and political events since the release of *Gladiator*, accompanied by a rising sense of imminent calamity, permit us to measure the film's achievement in expressing today's fraying consciousness. Following on general relief after dire warnings about the Y2K virus and terrorism, the film emerged during a brief moment of calm before a series of unsettling and demoralizing incidents. First a disputed presidential election, then a severe economic recession caused in large part by the criminal negligence of several overcompensated CEOs of large corporations. Then, and worst, terrorist attacks. With confidence in the safety of its borders shattered, the United States was plunged into a deep depression. It was attended by a rise in patriotism among the people and a noisy bout of saber-rattling from a government of questionable legitimacy. The loss of the space shuttle in February, 2003, struck a blow to America's assertion of global pre-eminence in scientific technology. Meanwhile, the military campaign in Afghanistan had failed to show any major results. Subsequently, things came to a head with the almost global isolation of the world's only superpower over war in Iraq and the start of this war in March, 2003. All this allows us to evoke comparisons between the unilateralist goals of the United States and those of imperial Rome. In such an environment, *Gladiator* offers a vision – some might say, a prescient vision – of the perils that an internally challenged empire faces. It is the more significant now that Americans contemplate the outcome of a highly technological war, a rising sense of discomfort with the volatile situation in the Middle East, and the uncertain position of their country in the world.

Recent discussions among diplomats and journalists about the current state of American global supremacy and the unrestrained

growth of a new American empire reinforce the analogy between Rome and the United States. Like the Romans, and despite their unrivaled martial, economic, and cultural power, Americans today are confronted by tensions arising from imperial ambitions, isolationism, and a lack of understanding of, respect for, and attention to their geo-political alliances. One analyst has referred to this ingrained national attitude as "the narcissistic confidence of Americans in the superiority of American values and practices, and their rootless inattentiveness to history and tradition – their own and other people's."[42] Some commentators have called on the United States to embrace its hegemonic role in response to terrorism, with one right-wing observer calling American dominance "a liberal and humanitarian imperialism, to be sure, but imperialism all the same."[43] Others here and abroad are openly critical of an incautious American leadership that refuses to acknowledge international concerns.

Washington's policy of brash unilateralism has heightened the general perception that America ignores or disdains international opinion and foreign allegiances. This leaves the United States in the precarious position of a lonely, self-righteous, and determinedly bellicose superpower. The 2003 State of the Union address was delivered on January 28 by a president indifferent to foreign opinion: "The course of this nation does not depend on the decisions of others." Like Commodus in *Gladiator*, who plans to dissolve the Roman senate so that the emperor can from now on act with sole power, President Bush has devalued the United Nations' role in maintaining global accord and pledged that America will act alone, if necessary. It has begun to do so.

Gladiator offers us an opportunity to draw some uncanny analogies between the unskilled young Roman emperor and the American president. Both attempt to govern in the shadow of a father who had previously ruled, and both use and distort their fathers' memory to further their political ambitions. Jealous Commodus is keen to acquire the love and respect of the Roman people that his father had enjoyed but criticizes Marcus Aurelius for his intellectualism: "My father spent all his time at study . . . books, learning, and philosophy. He spent his twilight hours reading scrolls from the senate." A number of Americans view President Bush's demeanor of anti-intellectual swagger and macho posturing as an anxious attempt to do better than Bush Sr., who failed to

42 Tony Judt, "Its Own Worst Enemy," *The New York Review of Books* (August 15, 2002), 12–17; quotation at 12.

43 Max Boot, "The Case for American Empire," *The Weekly Standard* (October 15, 2001), 27–30; quotation at 28.

capitalize on his popularity after the Gulf War or to be re-elected. The film also suggests some eerie verbal analogies, as both Commodus and Bush Jr. employ rhetoric imbued with overly emotional and sometimes childish tones. When Commodus faces Maximus' defiance in the arena, he reacts petulantly: "You simply won't die!" Similarly, Bush has reacted with sullen irritability to Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's lack of compliance with his wishes: "He must disarm. I'm sick and tired of games and deception!"[44] Commodus and Bush publicly decry the insubordination of their opponents in language showing that they take things altogether too personally for men in their exalted positions of world power. The film characterizes Commodus as immature, unreasonable, and ill-prepared for the demands of governing – utterly unlike his father; some critics have described Bush as initially unprepared for the global arena: "Bush junior, who came to the presidency without any knowledge of foreign affairs, could not make decisions or manage dissent as his more knowledgeable and experienced father had."[45] Both men describe the resultant political problems that plague them in terms of a world difficult to comprehend. Commodus exclaims: "The whole thing is like some crazy nightmare!" Bush grumbles: "This looks like a rerun of a bad movie, and I'm not interested in watching it."[46] Both are fully aware of their absolute power. But their behavior and attitudes are more palatable when they come from a cinematic Roman emperor than from a real American president. Commodus attempts to win Lucilla for his idea of disbanding the senate and rendering sole authority unto himself and tells her: "Rome has changed. It takes an emperor to rule an empire." Bush is likewise enamored of imperial power: "I'm the commander. See, I don't have to explain why I say things . . . maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anyone an explanation" and: "If this were a dictatorship, it'd be a heck of a lot

44 Quoted from Richard Reeves, "Bush Is Taking Saddam and Kim Too Personally," Universal Press Syndicate (January 17, 2003).

45 Frances FitzGerald, "George Bush and the World," *The New York Review of Books* (September 26, 2002), 80–1 and 84–6; quotation at 81 (on a statement made to her by Brent Scowcroft). Cf. the more recent assessment of Bush and his cabinet by Tony Judt, "America and the World," *The New York Review of Books* (April 10, 2003), 28–31, at 30: "when American leaders throw fits of pique at European dissent, and provoke and encourage internal European divisions, these are signs of incipient weakness, not strength. Real power is influence and example, backed up by understated reminders of military force. When a great power has to buy its allies, bribe its friends, and blackmail its critics, something is amiss."

46 Quoted by Ron Fournier, "Bush Scolds U.N. Members On Iraq: 'How Much Time Do We Need?' " Associated Press (January 21, 2003).

easier. Just as long as I'm the dictator."[47] Commodus and Bush are contemptuous of guidance from advisory councils and express their scorn by means of anti-intellectual bluster. Commodus is fed up with the senate ("Who are they to lecture me?") and says threateningly that the world will "soon forget the tedious sermonizing of a few dry old men." Bush disdains the United Nations, which will "fade into history as an ineffective, irrelevant debating society."[48] As a result, America has come to be regarded abroad as a new empire.[49]

The general analogies drawn frequently between imperial Roman history and imperious American politics have in at least one current case found a specific expression, linking the present US government and its inner circle of leaders who have been pushing for war in the Middle East – a modern Praetorian Guard? – to a Roman emperor, although not to Commodus. In a widely publicized letter of resignation after twenty years in the Foreign Service, addressed to Secretary of State Colin Powell, a high-ranking career diplomat asks, rhetorically but seriously:

> Why does our president condone the swaggering and contemptuous approach to our friends and allies this administration is fostering, including among its most senior officials? Has *oderint dum metuant* really become our motto?[50]

The appearance of the Latin phrase in this letter is revealing: "Let them hate as long as they fear" – an expression originally from the mouth of a mythical tyrant in a Roman tragedy but made famous, or rather, infamous, as a saying of Emperor Caligula. In the popular imagination of the

47 Quoted from Reeves, "Bush Is Taking Saddam and Kim Too Personally."

48 Bush was speaking at Mayport Naval Station in Mayport, Florida, on February 13, 2003; quoted from CNN.

49 Cf. Andres Oppenheimer, "Information Divide Explains Split with U.S. Over Iraq," *The Miami Herald* (March 23, 2003), 5A: "Even the words both sides use to characterize what is going on are different. While U.S. media talk about the 'coalition forces' or the 'U.S.-led war' on Iraq, the overwhelming majority of foreign press is talking about 'the U.S. war' or – I'm not making this up – 'the empire's war.' . . . Such is the conviction abroad that Bush is embarked on a neo-imperialist campaign to Middle Eastern oil and dominate the world that many normally restrained foreign newspapers have stopped worrying about subtleties. Brazil's influential *Folha de Sao Paulo* is carrying the daily news of the war under the thematic heading 'Ataque do Imperio' ('Attack of the Empire')."

50 John Brady Kiesling, "Iraq: A Letter of Resignation," *The New York Review of Books* (April 10, 2003), 91–2; quotation at 92. Prior to this publication, Kiesling's letter had circulated on the Internet for several weeks.

West, Caligula has come to be regarded as the second-worst quintessential Roman tyrant after Nero.[51]

Gladiator could not have predicted the type of president Americans would have, but the film strongly suggests that there are serious risks inherent in unchecked executive leadership. It argues in favor of a government marked by respect for republican principles and tempered by constitutional representation.

Rome survived Commodus. America, like Rome, persists. Empire is carried forward by its own institutional momentum even as its internal structure begins to unravel. At the time of the Iraqi war, Commodus' words about the Roman border campaigns took on new meaning, both for international and domestic affairs: "My father's war against the barbarians – he said it himself: it achieved nothing. But the people loved him." *Gladiator* asks Americans to contemplate whether purely national interests will be enough to discharge their imperial obligations. Unless it accepts the responsibilities that are part of the opportunities of empire, in particular the need to maintain rather than squander the high esteem it has earned from people and nations all over the world, America may be compelled to admit with Marcus Aurelius: "I brought the sword, nothing more." *Gladiator* also invites us to ponder the brittleness of the idea that an empire has the right to export its definition of what is just and good for the world and how vulnerable that idea can be to the indifference of its own leaders. "There was a dream that was Rome," says Marcus Aurelius. "You could only whisper it. Anything more than a whisper and it would vanish, it was so fragile." The frequently invoked American Dream occupies a similarly precarious place: "American power and influence are actually very fragile, because they rest upon an idea, a unique and irreplaceable myth: that the United States really does stand for a better world and is still the best hope of all who seek it."[52] Maximus is unwilling to identify himself with the debased concept of Rome as an empire. The ending of the film suggests that the noble and honorable idea of empire represented by Marcus Aurelius and Maximus continues to be in a state of risk. Maximus himself becomes a symbol of Rome's fragility.

In the end, viewers must themselves decide if *Gladiator* sends a positive message about heroism and empire or presents rather a bleak

51 Suetonius, *Caligula* 30.1. The phrase, preserved by Cicero and so becoming proverbial, is a fragment from the lost tragedy *Atreus* by Accius. Nero's tutor Seneca cites it in his philosophical essays *On Anger* (1.20.4) and *On Clemency* (1.12.4 and 2.2.2); the latter work is addressed to Nero.

52 Judt, "Its Own Worst Enemy," 16.

outlook on the subordination of individual heroes to the dictates of a callous ruler and the fading ideals of an unraveling empire. The film leaves us uncertain. Does it matter that Maximus never goes home until he is dead? Is fighting the good fight enough? Can the great dream of Rome ever be realized? *Gladiator* might not echo in eternity, but it has acquired an unexpected topicality. Lucilla asks: "Is Rome worth one good man's life?" The answer ought to be: "We believed it once. Make us believe it again."

Gladiator
Film and History

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