Popcorn and Circus: *Gladiator* and the Spectacle of Virtue

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Like many people of my generation, I owe my classical education to CinemaScope. I can trace the origins of my love of antiquity back to third grade, when I caught sight of a monumental close-up of Liz Taylor and Richard Burton frozen in an imminent kiss on a billboard announcing that *Cleopatra* was coming soon to a theater near *me*. And I say "me" because the conventional second-person singular didn't strike my nine-year-old mind as being merely rhetorical. Soon, the lovely queen and her rugged boyfriend seemed to follow me personally everywhere I went, and it kept me daydreaming in class and awake at night. Obviously, I had to see this movie. But there was a catch. I fell into utter despair one day, when I noticed that all these ads also included a sinister message: B-rating. No one allowed under fourteen. Seeing my sorry state, however, my mother decided to break the law: she dressed me up, painted my lips bright red, camouflaged me under a pair of sun glasses, and took me to the movies anyway. We were already getting cozy in our seats at the theater when an usher approached us politely and asked for my age. I can still remember our indignation as we were escorted into the street by the manager, mother still ranting at the top of her lungs about how they dared keep her child from enjoying what she called "a perfectly nice tragedy written by an immortal poet—and a lesson in ancient history, besides!"

I did get to watch *Cleopatra*, after all—on TV, the following year. Growing up in South America, I had many opportunities to indulge in my passion for such Hollywood extravaganzas, especially during Easter, when all forms of public entertainment were officially banned, except for classical

music and epic movies—"serious" art, supposedly suited to the spirit of contemplation demanded by this most mournful of Christian holidays. It was on Easter, for instance, that I was introduced to such masterpieces of operatic gravity as *Cosi fan tutte* and to that most chaste of love stories, the tale of the Egyptian Queen and her Marc Anthony.

This early enthusiasm for the grandeur, the pathos, and the twisted eroticism of these old films led me years later to force my own nine-year-old daughter to sit through a whole weekend's worth of epic movies I had carefully selected for her at the local video store, which is how I discovered that she was immune to Hollywood epic. These stories, which had made a precocious humanist of me and which had shaped my taste, my ethics, and, in all likelihood, my sexuality, were to her plain corny and phony, and, besides, too long. But it was more than maternal vanity that led me to suspect that this alarming disagreement between us was neither temperamental nor aesthetic, but rather historical, an insight I was able to confirm recently, when she cried her eyes out watching *Gladiator*.

On the surface, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* may seem like any of those movies I loved as a child. The story takes us to Germania during the last days of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, when the Roman army, led by Maximus, a provincial general, puts an end to barbarian domination. Soon after the battle, Marcus expresses to Maximus his gratitude, as well as his wish to name him "Protector of Rome" after his death, so that Rome can become, once again, a Republic, in spite of the fact that all Maximus wants is to return to his wife and son in Spain, and that Marcus already has a rightful heir who can't wait to become Emperor, his son Commodus. In a moving scene, the aging emperor announces his decision to Commodus, who murders him, weeping as he crushes the old man's throat, and who soon afterwards orders his rival's execution. But Maximus escapes and manages to return home, badly wounded (incredibly, bleeding all the way from Germany to Spain, but who cares?), only to find his farm burnt

to the ground and his wife and son crucified. Despondent, the Spaniard gives in to his wounds and is found barely alive on the road, and eventually sold as a slave in Zucchabar, where he's trained as a gladiator. What follows is the story of the hero's return to Rome, where Commodus reigns, unaware of his rival's survival, and where Maximus finds fame, revenge, and death at the Colosseum.

Indeed, reading this summary, *Gladiator* may sound like any of those old epic movies long outmoded by the time my daughter was born. The story brings to mind such memorable predecessors as Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), the saga of the real-life gladiator who waged war against Rome during the last years of the Republic, as well as Anthony Mann's elegant epic, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), which also develops during the chaotic reign of Commodus. All the essential elements are there: *Gladiator* too is a tale about the clash between the forces of good and evil embodied in two archetypal characters, an anonymous, righteous underdog and an all-powerful adversary, predictably a depraved, demented villain, and their match is set against breathtaking reconstructions of ancient sites and life and drenched in as much blood as can possibly be poured into two-and-a-half hours of film.

As with all great movie epics, the public's viewpoint in *Gladiator* moves swiftly from the private sphere where passions brew (the tent, the prison cell, the bedroom) to the vast background where public life and ancient history unravel (the battle field, the city, the Colosseum)—a grand stage, which lends its weight and scale to the minutiae of the personal drama. And, like *Quo Vadis?* (1951), *Ben Hur* (1959), and virtually every other of these Hollywood fantasies, *Gladiator*, too, involves a tense love triangle, in this case, between Maximus and Commodus' sister, Lucilla, who was Maximus' lover once and still loves him, and between Lucilla and her brother, who burns with an old incestuous passion for her, and whom she fears, on account of her complicity with Maximus and her allegiance to her son, Lucius Verus, who happens to be unwittingly—poor kid!—a fan of his uncle's rival, the mysterious gladiator who has become the talk of the town.

From the purely visual point of view, Scott's movie is firmly placed within a tradition that goes back at least as far as D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), grand spectacles where antiquity comes to life through extravagant productions and stunning special effects. If anything, the impressive computer-generated reconstructions in *Gladiator* strike one as a logical development of such technological breakthroughs as Technicolor and CinemaScope. Indeed, the uncanny image-definition made possible by computer generation compensates at least in part for the effect of sheer scale that made those earlier films so powerful at the theater, lending the movie a respectable afterlife in the world of home videos. I would even argue that, in some cases, *Gladiator* fares better in this humbler, domestic form. At times the level of detail is so exhaustive as to be optically implausible, especially in those vast panoramic views where it tends to flatten space, and where the effect is often more hallucinatory than realistic—a shortcoming of hi-tech illusionism which is curiously neutralized when the cinematic image is squeezed onto a TV screen.

But the formal differences between *Gladiator* and its predecessors are more significant still than its similarities. Let's begin with this. Although *Gladiator* at least feels to be as long as *Ben Hur* or *Quo Vadis?*, its script must be at the most only one third of theirs. The story is told less through speech than through images, which dramatically reduces the rhetorical weight of its predecessors. The text is specially scanty when it comes to the hero, a man of few words, a striking departure from the older epics, where everyone, whether consul or slave, sounds like an orator even during the most intimate love scenes. In fact, whenever Maximus appears on the screen, he's either fighting or brooding. And when he does speak, his words are at times surprisingly casual, even when he discusses conspiratorial plans with a senator or the afterlife with a fellow slave. In fact, I would argue that, for all the spectacular historical reconstructions and the predictable gore, Scott has managed to create an internal story set in ancient times—a quiet epic.

Consider, for instance, the visual foils for this peculiar narrative inwardness. Incongruous dreamlike images pop out often during the most brutally vivid scenes in the battlefield or the arena: the hero's rugged hand tenderly caressing a field of wheat; his inert body levitating across a dry, rocky land; a heavy wooden door slowly opening against a backdrop of swift, stormy clouds—images suggesting, first, the hero's yearning to return home and, later, to die. A similar lyricism informs even the most generic epic scenes. I must admit that, being an art-historian, the idea of war between Romans and barbarians or the gladiatorial games immediately conjures up scenes from the column of Trajan or the arch of Constantine and the mosaics of ancient villas, images where idealization never loses an inch to realism. So perhaps for that reason I was overwhelmed by the battle scenes in *Gladiator*. The riveting images from Germania, for instance, have all the rawness of World War II films. One thinks of the stunning opening scene in *Saving Private Ryan*, for instance. But, in its tone, *Gladiator* is a lot closer to *The Thin Red Line*, arguably the most realistic war movie ever made, but also the most poetic. Or else think of the flock of birds that Scott adds to the breathtaking, computer-generated view of Rome seen from the Capitoline Hill at dawn, or the veils of snow flurries and fire that envelop the German forest as the battle rages, like a doomed Valhalla.

The same goes for the score. The grandiose symphonic compositions that are the musical staple of the genre are largely absent here. For the most part, the score is as eerie as those images I described before. On and off, a haunting contralto voice sings in yearning, mournful tones, like the restless ghost of Maximus' wife calling him from the underworld. But the most significant differences between *Gladiator* and its earlier counterparts are to be found in the story itself.

Epic movies of this sort offer the enthusiast many kicks, starting with the obvious, the thrill of watching the grand cat-walk of golden-clad emperors and bejeweled courtesans, and the parade of armored soldiers, sci-fi–hero-like gladiators, wretched paupers, and exotic types in colorful tunics

and thread-bare rags, all of which feeds on the decidedly modern habit of judging people by what they're wearing. Yet watching my favorite epic movies again while preparing for this essay, I could almost smell the mothballs. Think of Kirk Douglas's minute costume in *Spartacus*, for instance, seemingly spotless and freshly ironed at all times, and functional only as a means to highlight the hero's heavily oiled, health-club physique. Or else, think of Tony Curtis' dainty slave mini-skirts, or the magnificent togas worn by the oversexed aristocrat played by Lawrence Olivier in the same movie, more reminiscent of the stiffness of the operatic stage than of the privilege of the villa. By contrast, the costumes and makeup in *Gladiator* are so evocative one could almost smell Lucilla's perfume and the pus in Maximus' maggot-infested wounds. Largely wrong by archeological standards (think of the Victoria's Secret–like corset that Lucilla wears over her tunic in the movie's last scene), the costumes in *Gladiator* convey the range of styles, and, most importantly, the personalities of these ancient people. The soldiers' costumes, for instance, are a far cry from the sparkling, polished image of the generic epic-movie warrior. They wear coarse woolen clothes and heavy armor (cast in rubber, really, and painted) and filthy scarves around their necks to soak up their sweat, and are, just like the barbarians and the gladiators, covered in generous mud and faux-blood baths. Lucilla's outfits, on the other hand, convey a level of luxury unimaginable in the modern world, where the dominant aesthetic, even among the very rich, is best illustrated by the democratic, puritanical clothes sold by The Gap and Banana Republic, and even by pricier counterparts, such as Donna Karan or Calvin Klein. In this context, Lucilla's outfits are apt to arouse in the likes of me a serious case of wardrobe-envy. In every scene, her body is wrapped in as many layers of texture and hue, and in as much jewelry and makeup (witness the dainty, tattoo-like pattern she often wears in between her eyebrows) as is practically possible to maintain one's sense of her irresistibly casual flair. Seeing the beautiful Connie Nielsen in her role as Marcus Aurelius' daughter, regally carrying her imminent mid-

dle age amidst the flutter of her veils, I couldn't help but think of Catullus' Lesbia. The costumes worn by Joaquin Phoenix in the role of the young emperor, on the other hand, outlandish and uncomfortable as they look to be, owe less to the generic theatricality of the epic-movie tradition than to the designers' astute effort to capture the personality of a man who must have been childish and fatuous, a man whom posterity will forever remember in his preposterous official guise as Hercules, a marble now at the Capitoline Museum—a sort of *Roi Soleil* at Halloween, his head dripping with ringlets, wearing a lion's skin, and holding his club as forcefully as Marlene Dietrich would carry a feather boa.

Like the costumes, the story in *Gladiator* is as historically unreliable as it is poetically plausible. (Does anyone mind that, strictly speaking, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is an artful calumny—a most unfair representation of a man who was, after all, not a bad king?) Maximus is a fictional character concocted from a few real-life people who lived across several centuries of Roman history. Lucilla did plot against her brother and Marcus Aurelius might have been murdered, though the details in each case vary according to what Roman historian you choose to believe. But the wacky Commodus, by all accounts, indeed, an amateur gladiator, did not die in the Colosseum, as the movie has us believe—the only significant departure from historical fact, and, in my view, an infelicitous happy ending to what is otherwise an exceptionally evocative story about a long-gone era. Consider, for instance, Maximus' attachment to his little *lares*—inaccurate in that they represent not his clan's ancestors, as they should, but his wife and child, but very effective in conveying the sense that the daily religious life of the ancient Romans was a lot more tribal than the magnificent temples to the Olympian gods and deified emperors would have us believe. Or details like the glasses from which aristocrats drink, filled with aromatic herbs, which remind us that, for all their hydraulic engineering marvels, by and large, the ancient Romans drank foul water.

More important, perhaps, Scott's movie, even more than

Spartacus, conveys to the modern public the sense that the gladiatorial games represented not only the most inhumane, but also, potentially, the most upwardly-mobile of all ancient professions: if most gladiators ended up as nameless carrion in the arena, a few of them became as outrageously famous as today's rock stars. But *Gladiator* expresses something far more important. If the pleasures of gladiatorial games seem unthinkable today, to a people raised on the bitter milk of war in far-away lands, disdain for pain and death and humility in the face of the unexpected were precious virtues: *audaces fortuna iuvat*. In the Roman imagination, the bold were Lady Luck's sweethearts.

Yet perhaps the most relevant departure from the epic tradition in this case lies in how the hero's story is told. Let's back up for the sake of context.

Epic movies offer the public an ambivalent thrill. They take us into a vertiginous journey to remote and grand worlds entirely unlike our own, yet deeply rooted in the popular imagination—the world of Sodom and Gomorrah, of Pharaohs and prophets, of gladiators, martyred Christians, and exquisitely depraved villains clad in shimmering tunics and nibbling on grapes—images which are part of the mythology of Western civilization's origins. They are tales about virtue, engrossing moral dramas made all the more effective precisely because they are presented against a backdrop of exuberant brutality. And here lies the complication: shot in extreme close-ups and explicit, breathtaking detail, these movies give us all a privileged chance to be morally outraged, but also to enjoy the carnage and to do so at a level of proximity unimaginable even to the most depraved of Emperors presiding over the games. And if the trick works, it is because these antiquarian extravaganzas are ultimately not about Abraham or Ben Hur, Spartacus or Maximus, or about anonymous Christian martyrs and converted centurions, but about ourselves, or, more precisely, about our ideals, conveniently presented in the flattering but distancing guise of armor and toga and confirmed by the authority of the past.

And this strategy is pointedly modern. The most significant example of this use of the past in pre-filmic art comes from the work of neo-classical artists such as Jacques-Louis David, who mined ancient Greek and Roman history for effective vehicles to promote current ideals, first, the Republican values of the French Revolution, and later, the imperialist hype of Napoleonic times. The strategy proved ideally suited after the rise of the bourgeoisie, a time when class and faith could no longer provide sufficient fuel for ideals, and when people didn't really have "a past," and thus were free to *invent* it. And the idea stuck. In fact, the taste for epic largely dominates the art of the nineteenth-century and a good part of the twentieth in both Europe and America, where both the exhibition spaces and the art market were taken up by the followers of such artists as Gérôme and Cabanel, Alma-Tadema and Laughton. I would argue that the first silent-movie epics are largely responsible for the eventual triumph of modernism, since they stole a large part of the art public, when seemingly from one day to the next, the Victorian and Edwardian girls who posed as Roman matrons and Vestal virgins, and the working-class boys that acted out gladiatorial prowesses in those grand historical paintings were suddenly brought to life, walked around, made love, killed themselves, or were crucified in front of one's eyes in the pitch-black dream world of the movies.

The genre reached a high point during the fifties, with the emergence of Technicolor and CinemaScope, which rendered the time-machine appeal of these spectacular productions even more thrilling. But there are more significant reasons. By then, movies such as *Ben Hur* or *Spartacus*, *Quo Vadis?* or *The Ten Commandments*, with their heroic martyrs, victimized slaves or Jews, and wicked emperors resonated with memories of the monstrosities of World War II, of formidable, real-life tyrants such as Hitler, of mass-murder and religious persecution, all still fresh in the popular imagination and enhanced by the paranoia of the Cold War. By the late sixties, however, the world took a significant turn, as highly un-heroic wars—Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia—made the military hype of such

old movies unpalatable, and as the sexual revolution gave their chaste Christian heroines and sinister, oversexed badguys all the veracity of Snow White and the Wicked Queen.

By the eighties, when my daughter found herself locked up in a New York apartment with *Ben Hur* and *Spartacus*, history had already dragged us well into what most call postmodernism and I prefer to call "the Age of Irony." By then, the world had run out of glamorous villains, as real power became increasingly associated, not with individual leaders, but with the anonymous forces of international finance. On the other hand, the threat of total destruction by environmental disaster or AIDS, and the failure of communism, overpowered the highly ideological tenor of my youth's culture, displacing, for instance, the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution from public consciousness to make space for more "realistic" alternatives, such as equal opportunity, multiculturalism, or gay rights. This was not the right atmosphere for ancient epic, but rather, for the small-scale world of the sitcoms and cartoons my daughter grew up with, *The Cosby Show*, *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld*, and for voyeuristic talk shows like Oprah's. The epic genre survived only around such subjects as *Gandhi*, *The Last Emperor*, or *Schindler's List*, of necessity, less mythic than historic, since they belong to our recent past. Rather than taking us into grand, archetypal eras, these movies take us to a sort of antiquity that's still alive within modernity, either in romanticized, exotic settings beyond the confines of the West or else framed by Western psychotic regressions such as the Holocaust. Why is it, then, that *Gladiator*—seemingly a return to good-old ancient Roman virtue and gore, swept most of the Oscars this year and made my postmodern daughter cry?

Never underestimate the power of sex appeal. Seeing Russell Crowe in the role of the noble hero, impassive in the face of calamity, hermetically locked in his virile melancholy, and shot almost always in close-up, had something to do with the movie's success. In this multicultural atmosphere, it helps to know that Maximus, though clearly of high birth, is

a provincial, a Spaniard. And in an era when actors and characters merge in the popular imagination, it also helps to know that Crowe is neither English nor American, but Australian. Besides, Maximus' soul mate was an African, a fellow slave, magnificently played by Djimon Hounson, and his greatest ally, an Arab, his own slave master, the old gladiator-turned-impresario, who ended up dying for his sake. (We owe it to poetic justice that the actor, the legendary Oliver Reed, died while shooting the film and was brought back to life in his last scenes by the magic of computer-generated imagery.)

Moreover, Maximus is the ideal filmic expression of the post-feminist "sensitive man"—a tough, big guy, almost proletarian in appearance, the opposite of Kirk Douglas's athletic Spartacus, of the pretty boy played by Tony Curtis in the same film or by Robert Taylor, the more conventionally handsome centurion, in *Quo Vadis?* Crowe also lacks the Michelangelesque, larger-than-life presence of Charlton Heston's Ben Hur. He is just a tough guy. In fact, he's strong but also chubby. (Crowe had to lose thirty pounds in a hurry for the role.) He strikes one as a man made strong by valor and circumstance, somebody equally at home on a battlefield and on a farm, in the fantasies of many a New York yuppie, the ideal husband: the classic outdoors type, manly, but not macho, and most irresistible of all, a loyal family man.

But the most significant difference between Maximus and his counterparts in this tradition lies in the nature of the character itself. The classic epic-movie hero is less a man than a symbol. Ben Hur stands for the oppressed Jews; Spartacus, for the slaves; the centurion in *Quo Vadis?*, for a transformed Roman consciousness, foreshadowing that most lasting of all Roman creations, Christianity. Even the Shakespearean Marc Anthony and Cleopatra in that most sui generis of film epics seem to stand for a potent, instinctive alternative to the traditional Republican values embodied in the figure of Julius Caesar, and, retrospectively, to the horrors associated with the empire built by their rival, Augustus, after their defeat. It is remarkable in this context that, for all his identification with the oppressed, and in spite of the fact

that his confrontation with the mad Emperor is the axis of the movie, Maximus' story is only circumstantially political. His only cause is revenge—a motivation which would have been insufficient, and perhaps morally suspect in the more political earlier epics. He does not fight for the slaves, for Rome, for the memory of Marcus Aurelius, or even for the safety of Lucilla or the young Lucius Verus. He represents no one but himself. For Maximus, fighting is the only way to mourn.

And to a large extent, the same is true of Commodus himself—a man moved less by political ambition than by Oedipal rage, by the rancorous, infantile lust for power that haunts those who have never been loved. At times, Joaquin Phoenix is so convincing as the depraved, vulnerable young emperor that he almost becomes a sympathetic character.

In this curiously *un*ideological time of ours, our Spaniard is the ideal hero: not a political martyr or a revolutionary leader, but rather, a champion of the private battlefield, a man ennobled by the collapse of his own rank and capable of reinventing himself from scratch, who triumphs not only over executioners, tigers, professional fighters, and formidable villains, but most importantly, over vanity, the most powerful of all foes.