

## Film Review

# Hollywood's New Cult Offensive: 'The Gladiator' To Revive Pagan Rome

by Elisabeth Hellenbroich

Ridley Scott's monumental film epic, *The Gladiator*, takes place during the Second Century A.D. The rule of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D.) is approaching its end, and his son, Commodus (180-192 A.D.), is crowned Emperor after his death. With Commodus' reign, the decline of the Roman Empire accelerates, and reaches its climax in 410, when Rome is plundered by the Goths.

The initial historical setting for the film is Marcus Aurelius' 12th campaign against the barbarians, who repeatedly breach the borders of the Empire on looting forays. "*Victor Roma!*" is the victory cry of the Roman legionnaires, who vanquish the barbarians in battles with many casualties. The barbarians of that time are the "rogue states" of today—to summarize the subliminal message of the film—while the only superpower, with its propaganda about "the new world order," is in the process of throwing the world into chaos. Under conditions of a globally collapsing financial system, economic crises, starvation, ethnic conflicts, and epidemics, Tony Blair, Al Gore, and George W. Bush present themselves as the modern heirs of this heathen-Roman, fascist heritage.

"The Roman gladiators of that time are the Anglo-American mercenaries of today," as one Israeli military historian commented on the film. The clock of history is turned back to the time prior to the Thirty Years War (1618-48). "People are tired of peace, the human being is a warrior-creature by nature," he said. In the face of a growing feeling of degradation in Western countries, the impotence of traditional armies and the fear of being the victim of terrorists and kidnappers, the feeling is growing that a new class of "warriors," i.e., "gladiators," is needed. "The Americans of today," claimed this historian, "are the modern Romans."

Parallel to the first showing of the film in European movie theaters, from Oct. 21, 2000 to Jan. 21, 2001, the British Museum in London will have an exhibition on "Gladiators and Caesars: The Role of Gladiator Games in the Roman Empire." The exhibition covers the period from 50 to 400 A.D., with a particular focus on the Second Century.

In an article titled "Blood and Circus," the London *Times* wrote on May 17, that *The Gladiator* shows that the violence of the Roman arenas is still alive today. "We are the heirs of

the gladiators. . . . The hooligans who cry for blood today at the football games and boxing matches are like the cheering plebs in the Roman arena. . . . Is that fascist propaganda?" the *Times* asked. It is clear, in any case, that "there is something in our blood which loves wars and the red death."

### Fascination with Decadence

The film begins in the foggy forests of Germany, where the Romans put down the last revolts of the barbarians. It is 180 A.D.; Emperor Marcus Aurelius is finally victorious over the Germans after 12 years of war. The Roman Empire is at the height of its power, and the aging Marcus Aurelius tells his most successful general, Maximus, that he should restore Rome to its former power and that the corruption should end.

Maximus is supposed to succeed him on the throne, but the jealous Commodus has Maximus arrested when Marcus Aurelius dies. Maximus manages to flee. Made a slave in the Roman province of Zucchabar in North Africa, Maximus becomes a gladiator who wants to take revenge for the injustice he has suffered (including the murder of his family), and in the end he organizes a revolt of the gladiators. Maximus himself dies in a fight with Commodus in the arena.

The Colosseum is the main field of action of the film, where nearly 150 orgies and gladiatorial games are held under Commodus's rule. Commodus "fascinates," according to English historian Edward Gibbon (*The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1764), as a perverse tyrant who committed the most unbelievable atrocities and wallowed in sensuality, living with 300 beautiful women and boys. When an attempt at seduction failed, he became violent.

The audience becomes a part of the "virtual reality" of the gladiatorial games in the film. It experiences one orgy of blood after the other, as if it were sitting on the seats of the Colosseum. There is no longer any difference between human beings and animals; human life is destroyed, to enjoy the act of destruction. The message of the film: Human beings become beasts in the gladiators' games, and the cheering, bloodthirsty crowd, the *vox populi*, the "voice of the people," applauds.

Change of scene from the Roman province in Africa to

Rome, the center of imperial power. Gigantic and monumental, the masses of human beings are almost suffocating, the edifice of the Colosseum surpasses all other monumental buildings in Rome. Here we experience Hollywood's fascination with "pure" fascist aesthetics—gigantomania, pomp, monumental edifices of heathen Rome, which served Hitler and Mussolini as models.

Commodus orchestrates gladiatorial games in the arena every second day, under the eyes of 50,000 onlookers: "The people love victory. . . . The greatness of Rome is an idea, a thing of the imagination. I will give the people an image of Rome and it will love me for it. I will give the people the greatest image of their lives," he says.

"Rome is the masses. He [the Emperor] takes away their freedom and they will applaud. He serves them death, and the people will love him for it," one Senator comments.

"Bread and circuses" are a central feature of the system by means of which the oligarchy stays in power, and Proximo, the "manager" of the gladiators, summarizes for Maximus the philosophy of the *vox populi*: "I was the best, because the crowd loved me. If you win the crowd, you win freedom. . . . Either you kill, or you will be killed."

Maximus, the gladiator, is depicted as a hero with whom the audience can identify. Identify with what? With a pagan Rome in which the oligarchs, following the Stoic-ascetic philosophy of Marcus Aurelius, introduce "bread and circuses," to divert the attention of the suffering population from the oppressive taxation, economic stagnation, and cultural collapse, and to keep them in permanent submissiveness?

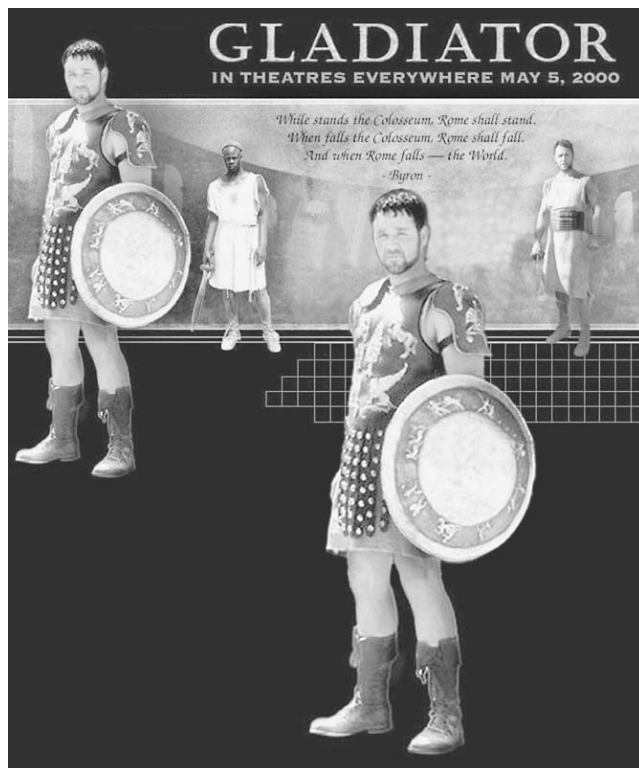
During Marcus Aurelius' reign—in the 19 years he was in power, 17 were years of war—a great deal of money was spent on the circuses, and the persecution of the Christians was intensified.

Marcus Aurelius' philosophy is expressed in his self-conception: The life of the Stoic is fatalistic, the rhythm of the world is a monotone and meaningless: "Whatever happens to you, it was predetermined to happen for eternity." Ephemeral life is shaped by pessimism and hopelessness. "Yesterday some slime, today a mummy or a river, the senses clouded, the whole of life a theft of rot," he writes.

The film conveys the morbid fascination with a Rome which collapses as a consequence of imperial expansion, economic and demographic collapse, and cultural self-destruction. Rome was a military state which was oligarchic at its core, not founded on the accomplishments of a real republic—technological progress, and intellectual revolutionary discoveries; it was founded on the booty of war, the human and material tribute of conquered peoples, the income of mines and quarries, and the taxes of an increasingly enslaved population.

## The Role of Christianity

One essential aspect is not addressed in the film: the persecution of Christians. Under Marcus Aurelius, but especially under Commodus and Diocletian, the persecution became



increasingly cruel. Christians were either thrown into the arena to be devoured by wild animals, or they were burned like living torches. Apparently the director of the film wanted to hide the pagan dimension of the oligarchic world he admires so much.

Christianity—as St. Augustine (354-430) wrote about it in his *The City of God*—represented a crucial development for human civilization. For the first time, building on the heritage of the Greek Classics and the writings of the Apostles, an image of Man was shaped which is based on the universal principle, that every person is made in the image of the Creator, to increase the power of human beings over the universe and promote the well-being of all people.

For the first time, a God confronted the Pantheon of the licentious gods, as St. Augustine writes, a God which is the sole ruler of Creation, whose Creation is subordinated to one law, which is above all laws created by human beings. For the first time, with Christianity, the idea of a higher divine justice, the idea of the dignity of all people, was given higher rank than positive law and religious cults.

Where the human being was merely an instrument and object for the Roman Empire, in Christianity, the human being became the conscious subject of history, who intervenes into history to give it the direction toward the good, instead of fatalistically submitting to fate.

In spite of the propaganda campaigns, the hope remains that healthy human reason will assert itself among a majority of people, in the face of imminent shocks, against the "virtual reality" of Hollywood.