

FINAL MOVIE CRITIQUE



People never get tired of watching and listening to breathtaking and inspiring stories about heroes. In fact, it is one of the themes that will not go out of fashion and will intrigue the ogling audiences. Nowadays, the film industry exploits the heroic theme to the full extent, making it a glorious touchstone of American culture. Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) has breathed new life into an obsolete genre, reviving the public interest in dazzling epic dramas. The film can be given credit for its grandiose spectacle, stirring action, and a plethora of visual delights. In fact, the director stakes on a set design and visual splendor rather than intriguing plot or complex characters. Ridley Scott excels at evoking emotional empathy in viewers through smooth and escalating music score, an expanded palette of clever and beautiful visual effects, breathtaking battle scenes and top-notch actors.

The plot is simple and straightforward, yet absorbing and intriguing, and the viewers are compelled to follow the story to the end, even though the finale can be predicted. A legendary general of the Roman army Maximus (Russell Crowe) finds favor with the old ruler, Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris), who wants to name a loyal man his heir. However, Caesar's selfish and arrogant son, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), does not share the aspirations of his father and murders him. He also orders to kill Maximus and his family. The fearless general survives, but is forced into slavery. He is trained as a gladiator in the arena, where he quickly gains power and fame. Maximus wants to take revenge on the murderer of his son and wife. In Rome he allies with Commodus' sister, Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) and the Senate in order to



put an end to the new emperor's reign. The final duel ends in Maximus' victory over his foe, but, eventually, the hero dies of a mortal wound inflicted earlier by Commodus.

Various aspects of the Roman Empire are highlighted via changing perspectives of the protagonist. At the beginning of the film, we encounter people in power who are portrayed in a favorable light. Their military strategies account for the invincibility of the Roman Army. Later on, we get insights into the lives of Roman slaves and gladiators. The main tension in the film is not focused on whether Maximus survives the never-ceasing ordeal, but on how he will do so. We can witness major negative sides of the Roman culture from the inside: for instance, the agony and fear of the slaves and gladiators when they have to fight for their lives. Although Rome appears to be visually impeccable, its moral corruptness is being exposed and criticized to some extent.

Gladiator is inspired by certain historical events; however, much of the plot is fiction. In reality, Commodus never missed an opportunity to show his immense strength and often appeared in the Coliseum. His lust for his sister Lucilla is not proven by historical records. Commodus was killed after he had reigned in Rome for nearly thirteen years. Unfortunately, general Maximus is a fictitious character.

To my mind, Scott conveys the culture and spirit of Ancient Rome, kindling the public interest in the Ancient World. However, he does not pursue the goal to stick to chronological facts. The primary goal of *Gladiator* is to entertain the viewers. Allen M. Ward suggests that "by a combination of rigorous attention to the historical record and creative imagination, *Gladiator* could have been much more historically valid and still have remained dramatically as exciting as it is" (2004, p.44).

Despite the fact that *Gladiator* definitely lacks intellect and historical threads, the film deserves special praise for fighting sequences and panoramic views, which are achieved with the help of computer generated images (CGI). However, the film has gained a wide critical acclaim and turned into a commercial success worldwide not only due to modern special effects:

Gladiator combined the spectacular decadence of and imperial intrigue from films like *Quo Vadis* and *Cleopatra* with the serious narrative of an appealing hero's tragic journey as in *Spartacus*. Enhanced by the brilliant application of the latest computer technology, *Gladiator* delivered a compelling, new kind of film: entertaining, stirring and impressive-looking. (Cyrino, 2005, p. 225)

Russell Crowe's performance is very convincing and appealing, so I cannot imagine a better candidate for this role. His inborn charisma and leadership qualities serve him perfectly in *Gladiator*. "Crow often seems to play the role of the general-turned-slave Maximus without effort. He's the opposite of a showoff or a ham or an over-actor" (O'Hara, 2000, p.1). For Crow, it was the most physically demanding experience, as he told in the interview to Prairie Miller. Nevertheless, this role won him the Best Actor Academy Award in 2000 and international recognition of his talent. Crowe confessed that there were a lot of things about *Gladiator* that excited him: "Like when you walk into the Coliseum and there's five thousand extras going, Maximus, Maximus, five thousand people screaming. This is theater on a grand scale. And that absolutely helps you get into the moment" (Personal communication, 2000). He "took a leap of faith in this film" and turned the movie into success. Russell Crowe proves that he is an extremely versatile actor capable of projecting the charisma of a fierce,

courageous, and invincible gladiator, a true field commander, a loyal emperor's servant, and a rebel. Crowe's character seems very real, although he has some traits of an action hero – he gets hurt and eventually killed.

Joaquin Phoenix is also a brilliant actor who more often than not plays villainous roles. This time, as usual, he does a great job, for his character is both understandable and easy to hate. His Commodus is a spoiled young emperor, avid for authority and fame. He wants to be seen as a powerful and formidable, but is in effect a weak and self-absorbed man.

Phoenix's character is rather complex, for there are moments when it is impossible not to feel pity for him, and in other moments he is simply detestable. Commodus is torn between two opposing feelings, namely love for his father and hatred of him. He constantly seeks love and support either by his sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) or by the people of Rome. Mark O'Hara in his film review considers Joaquin Phoenix to be miscast: "Phoenix delivers the least naturalistic, the least transparent performance among the major players" (2000, p.1). I will dare not to agree with O'Hara, and I think that the role of Commodus is one of the most convincing and memorable in *Gladiator*, so he is a perfect actor in a perfect role.

The execution of *Gladiator* is very impressive. A combination of contemporary film techniques and old-fashioned film-making brings the flavor of ancient Rome to life, with its imperial splendor, pomp, and horror. Every fight with a clash of swords, clanging of metal, and cutting, slashing and stabbing is accurately recorded by camera. During many combat scenes the camera is moving all over the place without focusing on anything in particular, hinting at violence rather

than showing it.

The cinematography by John Matheson is astounding. While some of the scenes are overly dim and the characters appear grim-looking, there are brighter scenes, like the flashbacks to Maximus' past and the scenes at the Coliseum, which dazzle with their visual glory. The episodes of clouds whizzing by in unnatural speed emphasize the passing of time. Some battle scenes become repetitive, especially in the second half of the film. Battle is often suggested through different frames speeds and narrow shutters. "It was meant to give the impression of what it's like to be in a battle, to be so exhausted, frightened, lost, leaning on someone to shove a sword through them, rather than fighting in the noble way, that total exhaustion, mud, blood and terror" (Mathieson, 2004, p. 111). The cinematographer, John Mathieson recounts about his thrilling shooting experience in Alex Ballinger's book *New Cinematographers*. The choice of cameras, process of shooting, grapple with light and shadow, close-ups, distant views, weather conditions are the main points, which Mathieson shares in the book.

What makes *Gladiator* worth watching is the intensity and power of the climax and unpredictability of some moments that stir an adrenaline rush. The opening scene is breathtaking, riveting and suspenseful. It impresses with the speed and ferocity of the battle. In my opinion, it is an excellent hook for viewers, grabbing their attention from the very first minute. "The film has a particular tendency to play with the pace through editing, slowing down some takes and juxtaposing them to scenes which appear to have been accelerated" (Paquin, 2001, p.1). Ridley Scott turns carnage scenes into a spectacle that pleases the crowd. When Crowe asks the cheering audience, if they have been entertained, we may feel a bit shameful for our reaction. Although time

changes, people still prefer two things, namely bread and entertainment.

Through camera shots, the viewers can feel the main character's anxiety, happiness, fear, etc. This emotional involvement into the action is achieved with the help of music that constantly grows in intensity, creating a highly charged atmosphere. The great music score by Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard perfectly captures the spirit of the Roman epic. The movie has become such a success with the viewers owing to the score, which is based on the classical Viennese waltz, the rousing French horns, trumpet solos, guitar, deep male choir, strings and brass, cello and flute. The score electrifies the viewers' emotions, making them feel like on the roller-coaster. In order to create a dramatic effect, Zimmer resorts to synthesizers and electronic manipulation of orchestral elements. Although he did not take pains to research the Roman music to produce a historically relevant score, the audience immediately liked the soundtracks, and they were in high demand after the movie was released.

Some music critics blamed Hans Zimmer for his unscholarly tendency to rely on plagiarism. In fact, in April of 2006 Zimmer was sued for the opening scene in *Gladiator* resembling the score from *Mars*. In *Gladiator* he overdid with classical pieces without making an effort to adapt them intelligently. I am not a music critic, and Zimmer's score pleases my ears and stirs my emotions. *Gladiator* vividly demonstrates that music score can have a significant effect on the narrative, commenting on what to expect from scene to scene. Even though the movie is predictable, its music sustains the interest for the audience, compelling them to watch till the closing credits appear on the screen. The music does not add layers of meaning to the scenes, but enhances the mood that ranges from boisterous, menacing to romantic and



solemn.

Ridley Scott is known and recognized for his peculiar style marked by sweeping visual effects and intricate shots. However, he is often criticized for attaching too much importance to style and ignoring substance, but that only distinguishes Scott from other directors, and one cannot but notice how substance is entwined with style. In such a way Scott tries to communicate with the audience and, taking into account that *Gladiator* won five Academy Awards, namely Best Picture, Best Actor in a Leading Role, Best Costume Design, Best Visual Effects, and Best Sound, the director's style found a broad response among the movie goers. Scott succeeds at creating a fully convincing world of Ancient Rome. Rumor has spread it that he was shown a nineteenth century painting entitled *Police Verso* (Thumbs Down) and that spurred by imagination and ambition, Scott decided to breathe life into the painting as well as nearly defunct toga-and-sandal genre. A huge amount of historical research was required to create an impressive cinematic counterpart of Ancient Rome with its splendor, symmetrical balance and arch shapes, which enhance the feeling of rhythm. Fort Ricasoli in Malta was chosen as a major filming location, because it was designed in the Romanesque style and perfectly imitated the urban fabric of Rome. Here in Malta a replica of a part of Coliseum was built, which cost about \$1 million; the rest of the Coliseum was constructed with the help of CGI.

For exterior scenes, the filmmakers created complex digital models, based primarily on the Neo-Classical architecture derived from Ancient Rome. For interior scenes, Scott relied heavily on Victorian paintings and studied them carefully in Rome in order to avoid the artificial look characteristic of previous epics. Despite historical accuracy of the buildings and famous sights, I consider that Scott overdid with the



depiction of Rome, because the city looks too sterile and picturesque. However, the director should be given credit for allowing the viewers to have glimpse at large temples made of white marble, magnificent statues, and columns scattered across the place. Scott also borrowed a few ideas from Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* (1934), which chronicles the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg. In fact, the director stages the appearance and salutation of Commodus in keeping with the best traditions of Hitler times, underscoring the dictator's manner of the conceited Roman ruler (Landau, Parkes, Logan, & Scott, 2000).

The attention to detail is outstanding both in the set and costumes. The emperor's family costumes are the most elegant and elaborate. Connie Nielsen's gowns are made of silk, chiffon, satin, and organza. The contrast of color and texture is achieved through the shift of bindings that adorn her dresses. Almost every garment seems to be embroidered with gold threads that shimmer in the light. The sophisticated design of the royal jewelry is also in tune with the fashion of the time.

In many ways Scott makes us relate to ancient Rome, turning our attention to architecture, a true value of human life, and the spirit of the epoch. His visual restorations are amazing. Although the flimsy aerial shots of the Coliseum may hurt the viewers' eyes, they create an illusion of here and now. The director intentionally keeps the viewers removed from the battle, suggesting blood shedding, but never gives them a pleasure to watch a morally reprehensible slaughter. This focus on action dynamics, rather than statics, characterizes most of Scott's celebrated movies. In the scene when Commodus considers the fate of his sister Lucilla, the digital interpretation of Rome is stunning. A lot of visual effects compensate for the lack of dialogues, making the film

even more entertaining for the viewers.

It will not be an exaggeration to state that *Gladiator* has made a huge impact on the subsequent historical films shot in Hollywood. Before *Gladiator* was released in 2000 no director had attempted to make a historical film of such a magnitude with impressive and costly digital effects, full recreations of luxuries of Ancient Rome, and casts of thousands. Contrary to the majority of contemporary superficial movies, *Gladiator* has many lessons to teach the young and old generations. It is not only about battles, but about relationships between parents and their children, siblings, and spouses. It is also about love and hatred, good and evil, loyalty and betrayal, courage and cowardice, honesty and lies, vengeance and forgiveness, right and wrong choices. It makes the viewers relate to the characters, sympathize with their weaknesses and celebrate their strengths, as well as draw a parallel between fiction and real life. The film hints at complex decisions and moral choices the main characters make, reducing the distance between the past and the present and leaving the viewers to ponder some of the hardest and most persistent questions.

Indisputably, *Gladiator* is a mesmerizing battle spectacle that, despite its predictable plot and fast-paced succession of events, offers an insight into ancient Rome obsessed with the insatiable lust for bread and circuses. We are glued to the screens, watching the electrifying battles in the arena and contemplating the depravity of the human nature. Our Western Culture goes back to its origins in ancient Rome and Greece. Whether we admit it or not, but thrilling death games are not less entertaining today than they were hundreds years ago. Since the release of *Gladiator*, the epic genre has become more popular in Hollywood, as vividly demonstrated by such films as *Troy* (2004),



Alexander (2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *300* (2006), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), etc. However, *Gladiator* ranks first in terms of visual effects, musical score, greatly choreographed fight scenes, believable characters, and convincing performance.