

## The Return of the Epic?: *Gladiator* (2000)

### Introduction

In May 2000, *Gladiator* became the first successful ancient world epic film to be released for over thirty years, to the surprise of both film critics and students of the ancient world. The genre had been virtually written off, with satirical re-visionings of epic films like *Carry on Cleo* and *Monty Python's Life of Brian* all too happy to lampoon its faults. It was a genre thought to be too pompous, too self-important, and no longer a suitable vehicle for discussing modern concerns. In the light of this widely-held critical judgement, some of the choices made by *Gladiator's* creators seemed at the time almost perverse. The film borrowed a large part of its narrative from the last Hollywood epic film to be produced, the aptly-named *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), itself a box-office failure. It avoided the glamorous and well-known world of early emperors like Nero and Caligula, and instead chose to focus on the more sombre period around the death of emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD and the accession of his son Commodus. It advertised and presented itself without irony as an old-fashioned epic, making no concessions to post-modern taste or fashion with its posters showing monumental architecture, its corny tagline ('a hero will rise') and references in its trailer to all the clichés of the past: soldiers, slaves, gladiators, emperors – even tigers in the arena.

*Gladiator* was often described by critics as the spearhead for a return of the ancient world to the big screen; for the re-animation of the 'dead genre' of cine-antiquity. In fact, as previous chapters have shown, cine-antiquity never did die, although it did stop appearing in the form of epic film. Moreover while films such as *Fellini-Satyricon* and Disney's *Hercules* continued to reimagine the ancient world for new audiences, old-fashioned epic still remained reasonably fresh in people's memories. Responses to *Gladiator's* release showed that, in the popular cultural imagination, the ancient world on film (indeed, for many, the ancient world generally) had become the ancient world in epic film. A number of questions arise from this. Why, given this popularity, had there been no new ancient world epic films released for over thirty years? How, in the absence of new releases, did the ancient world epic film achieve the cultural dominance described above? What were the factors that made *Gladiator* so successful? And can the ancient world epic films that followed match its success?

The decline and subsequent absence of the ancient world epic film

between 1964 and 2000 has been explained by scholars and film critics as the result of a combination of factors, including changing audience tastes and demographics, the transformation of the Hollywood studio system, and the growth of television viewing. It is usually claimed that the death rattle was heard most clearly with the 1963 release of Joseph Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra*. This film was beset with problems. Its eventual release followed a two-year period of production which saw the scrapping of early shooting and sets in England, serious illness for its star Elizabeth Taylor, and much potentially disastrous publicity about her very public adulterous affair with her co-star Richard Burton (see Chapter 8 for further discussion). The film's final budget of \$44 million (from an original estimate of about \$2 million) placed it among the most expensive films ever produced. It was actually extremely successful with audiences, becoming the highest-grossing film of 1963 in the US. However, studios receive only a relatively small proportion of the box-office gross, and a truly immense audience would have been needed to recoup costs. The final nail in the coffin came with one more Roman epic film released the following year; directed by Anthony Mann, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* described the death of the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius (played by Alec Guinness) and the disastrous succession of his son Commodus (Christopher Plummer), challenged by the Roman general Livius (Stephen Boyd, previously seen as the villain Messala in *Ben-Hur*) and Marcus Aurelius' daughter Lucilla (Sophia Loren). Despite, or perhaps because of, an intelligent script and strong performances from most of the lead actors, the film was not popular with filmgoers, grossing only \$4,750,000 in return for its production costs of over \$18 million.

Though the critical and audience receptions for these films were quite different, both illustrate one of the major reasons Roman epics fell out of favour with filmmakers. The films had always been massively expensive to produce. Indeed (as discussed in previous chapters) the expense of their production had been regularly used by publicists as part of the extra-cinematic spectacle to promote the films. However, by the early 1960s, the studios were no longer all-powerful. In 1948, a long-standing anti-trust lawsuit brought by the US Government against the major studios (known as 'the Paramount case') forced them to surrender certain monopolies over the means of film production, distribution, and exhibition. This case has been widely seen as the beginning of the end of the studio system, although it was some years before its consequences were properly felt.

The Hollywood studio system had acquired its power by maintaining control. On the production side, writers, actors, producers and directors were kept on contract; the studios owned the sets films were made on, the equipment used to make them, and the laboratories that processed the prints. On the distribution and exhibition side, they also owned the theatres in which the films were screened. The 1948 ruling banned block and blind booking, and led over the following years to the five major

studios selling off their theatres, breaking the monopoly on all aspects of the filmmaking process, and drastically reducing the overall power of the studios. Over a period of time, studios also shed their production role, using independent production companies to spread the financial load with costly productions. In the case of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, for example, the burden of financial failure was borne by producer Samuel Bronston's production company with Bronston himself filing for bankruptcy in 1965. Without the power and financial resources of the major studios, funding for expensive epic films became much more difficult to secure. However (as later expensive productions proved) it would not have been impossible had there been confidence that such films would continue to achieve box-office success. By the time of the release and box-office failure of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, such confidence had vanished.

And yet, in the years between the disastrous release of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and the successful release of *Gladiator*, Roman epic films continued to play a significant role in shaping the reception of the ancient world in popular culture. A major reason for this was the growth of television; paradoxically also nominated as a key reason for cinema's decline. There is no doubt that television played a significant part in changing audience habits in the early 1960s, with more people acquiring their own television sets, and seeing television viewing as their primary source of entertainment. However, television is also a medium for film exhibition, and Roman epic films proved to have certain advantages here. Their length makes them highly suitable to fill daytime television viewing slots on Sundays and public holidays (and, on commercial channels at least, advertisement breaks made viewing less of a feat of stamina). Their coy attitude to sexuality and largely off-screen violence make them inoffensive for family viewing, an important consideration with television's less regulated audience. This has been especially the case for television scheduling on public holidays, when whole families would replicate the films' original viewing contexts, sitting down together to watch. In particular, *Ben-Hur* (1959) has become a staple of Easter viewing with its depiction of Christ's Passion, appearing on at least one channel every year. This continual rescreening both reinforced the familiarity of existing viewers with the conventions of the epic – their spectacle, grandeur, and presentation of ancient Rome – and introduced them to new viewers. This interest extended beyond television viewing, with the broad and repeated exposure also cementing the films' status as cultural icons which could be used as short-cut representations in other media, including advertising. In addition, the successful theatrical re-release of *Spartacus* in 1991 (grossing more than \$1,600,000) showed that there was still an audience for the ancient world epic on the big screen.

Such continuous dissemination has fixed an identity for Rome (and, by extension, the ancient world generally) in popular culture that is very largely associated with the iconic representations of epic films. Hence

*Monty Python's Life of Brian* can expect audiences to instantly recognise a reference to the monumental lettering of *Ben-Hur* in its credit sequence. In an example from television, the BBC's trailer for an 'Ancient Rome' week in 2006 screened a vox-pop montage of random people stopped on the street, announcing 'I'm Spartacus' to camera (the intended implication presumably being that we are all ancient Romans, rather than that we are all slaves). The maintenance of this iconography for Rome in epic films over the long period of its disappearance from new cinema releases was undoubtedly one of the factors that helped *Gladiator* to success on its release in 2000, providing a bedrock of familiarity on which it could build its revisionary Rome. Given this iconic continuity, the decision to borrow so many aspects of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* for its own narrative might be understood as a deliberate attempt to frame Ridley Scott's film as the natural heir to the long-slumbering giant of a genre that was the Roman epic film.

The next section will focus in more detail on how *Gladiator* succeeded in this genre revival. But was there ever a true revival, or was the film a unique success in its own right? It is true that *Gladiator's* release in 2000 has been followed by a number of other epic-scaled films set in the ancient world: *Troy* (2004), *Alexander* (2004) and *300* (2007) were in the first wave, achieving mixed degrees of success. More recently there has been a mini-flurry of antiquity-themed films, including *Agora* (2009), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010), *Centurion* (2010), *Immortals* (2011) and *The Eagle* (2011). A sequel to *Clash of the Titans*, titled *Wrath of the Titans* is in production at the time of writing, slated for release in 2012. *Percy Jackson and the Sea of Monsters* is also in the early stages of production. More films have been proposed but remain unmade, including three more *Alexander* films, a prequel to *Gladiator*, and a remake of *Jason and the Argonauts*. However, there is some evidence for anxiety about the audience's appetite for ancient world epics: Vin Diesel's *Hannibal the Conqueror* was first announced in 2002, and is currently scheduled for release in 2012; prospective viewers may not wish to hold their breath.

Are there any common themes in this apparent revival? Many of the new films have taken their inspiration from children's literature. The *Percy Jackson* films adapt the first two of a successful series of juvenile novels by Rick Riordan which see an ordinary boy discover his true identity as the son of the god Poseidon, and follow his friendships and adventures at a training camp for demi-gods, Camp Half-Blood. The similarities with the *Harry Potter* series are irresistible, and although the original manuscript for the first *Percy Jackson* book was completed before the first *Harry Potter* book, it was not finally published until 2005, some time after the success of the latter in both book and film form. The first *Percy Jackson* film was directed by Chris Columbus who also directed the first two *Harry Potter* films. It is reasonable to assume then that economic confidence in the *Percy Jackson* films has been built on the success of other

films adapted from children's literature, and not on the success of *Gladiator* as an ancient world epic. Similarly, *Centurion* and *The Eagle* both took their inspiration from the classic children's historical novel, *The Eagle of the Ninth* by Rosemary Sutcliffe, first published in 1954.

There are a greater number of films inspired by Greece than Rome, a significant change from the earlier preference for Roman epic films. In the case of *Troy*, *Alexander* and *300*, all have been read as repeating the classical Hollywood epics' use of the ancient world to discuss modern political concerns, in particular conflicts between the western world and Islam. Unlike the post-Second World War and Cold War Roman epics though, these films do not always offer clear-cut heroes and villains, illustrating the complexity of the issues rather than offering us easy answers. But is this what audiences want from an epic film? The films' mixed box-office reception bears witness to their difficult nature, with audiences complaining, for instance, that they were not provided with a clear moral schema in *Troy*. In contrast, the most successful of the three, *300*, is (like *Gladiator*) unequivocal in its identification of heroes and villains.

In the films that have been read as epics, history still tends to prevail over myth. Oliver Stone's *Alexander* is the only survivor of a clutch of proposed films about Alexander the Great; *300* adapts the narrative of the Spartan defence of Thermopylae in 480 BC (see Chapter 5 for more on this event in history and in film). Even in the Greek-inspired films that do take mythology as their starting point, fantastic elements are defused. *Troy* takes a resolutely historicising approach to the Trojan War cycle, offering rational explanations for the actions of gods and heroes in Homeric epic. At one point, even the film's title was changed to the more historical-sounding *The Trojan War*, though negative audience response led to the reinstatement of its earlier title.

One film that does seek to combine epic filmmaking and mythical elements is *Clash of the Titans*. Described as a remake of the 1981 adventure film of the same title (with iconic special effects by Ray Harryhausen), the 2010 film takes the same set of characters and some of the same events, but creates a much more gung-ho narrative based around man's superiority to the gods. The emphasis is on action rather than fantasy, and although the filmmakers enlisted Ray Harryhausen's involvement, it is hard to see how this film could have met his earlier pleas for more fantasy in cinema (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of this). What *Clash* does appeal to is the videogames aesthetic, with its dense backgrounds, simple character motivations and accented metallic sound design. Dunstan Lowe has noted that the film shares common features with the *God of War* videogame franchise: 'both have a butch, vengeful anti-hero whose family's deaths were indirectly caused by a god; both feature climactic, scenery-smashing wrestling matches with Gorgons; and both portray a dysfunctional world in which mortals are innocent but

weak, and gods are cruel but vulnerable'. Indeed, the videogame version of *Clash* was due for release a month before the film, although it was delayed due to technical problems. Lowe (2009: 72-4) has argued elsewhere that the concurrent growth in popularity of antiquity-themed films and antiquity-themed videogames has been a symbiotic process. Certainly there are popular videogames either directly based on, or inspired by the same narratives as all of the new films mentioned in this chapter. With an increasingly large proportion of an epic film's visual look governed by Computer Generated Imagery (CGI), and videogames being accessed on ever bigger screens by multiple concurrent users (as in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), films and videogames seem to be growing ever closer in their modes of consumption.

In fact, the effect that the success of *Gladiator* has had has not simply been on the epic film genre. Rather it has raised general interest in the ancient world, and thus encouraged its representation in mass popular culture across a range of contexts: in advertising campaigns like the Pepsi gladiator advertisements that screened throughout the US and the UK in 2006 and 2007; in a reported increase in interest in university study; in the increasingly culturally important field of videogames; in the production of new television programmes including historical docudramas and prestigious series like HBO/BBC's *Rome*. The revival of the epic film genre may still be tentative, but popular culture's increasing interest in the reception of antiquity is more certain.

### Background to case study

In fact, re-invention rather than revival was closer to the agenda of the film's director. Talking to Richard Corliss in an interview for *Time* magazine at the time of *Gladiator*'s release, Ridley Scott discussed his recollection of Roman epic films: '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 re-invent it.' A closer look at *Gladiator* shows that it is very much the product of a postmodern sensibility: knowing, with regard to its cultural antecedents, and in open collusion with its audience over the techniques it uses to re-present the ancient world.

The decision to make gladiators the central theme of this attempted re-invention was an astute one. Gladiators and the arena have been persistent and popular features of cine-antiquity from early days; for instance, DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) has an extended and influential arena sequence. Gladiators have been the focus of films set in Rome like *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) and *Spartacus* (discussed in Chapter 4); have stood as a powerful symbol for the decadence of Rome in films like *Barabbas* (1962) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*; and provided a vehicle for satire in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (discussed in Chapter 8). Their cinematic appearances are not restricted to films set in

Rome. Gladiatorial-style combats feature in most films set in antiquity. In *Jason and the Argonauts*, for instance, Jason and his opponent Acastus battle it out on the deck of the Argo with trident, net, and short sword. In *Alexander the Great* (1955), the sequence marking the turning point for Alexander's ambitions begins with a gladiatorial-style combat between a (Macedonian) Greek and a Persian. Such one-on-one combats offer a perfect opportunity for the physical expression on-screen of more abstract narrative oppositions including good and evil, new and old, East and West, paganism and Christianity.

However, the modern notion of the cinematic gladiator as hero is at odds with the generally unsympathetic Roman attitudes towards his ancient counterpart (see discussion in Chapter 4). Although gladiators could achieve something akin to celebrity status, they were more usually regarded as degraded by the use of their bodies for public entertainment. In the ancient sources, the enthusiasm of emperors and other figures for taking part in such public entertainments as the games is used as a sign that they have crossed the line of acceptable behaviour. For example, there is little that is glamorous in Dio Cassius' description of the emperor Commodus shooting ostriches in the arena with a bow and arrow. Whatever the Romans thought of gladiators, they were never the moral exemplars found in Hollywood films.

Predictably (and understandably), the makers of *Gladiator* took a similar stance towards historical authenticity to that taken by all other epic filmmakers before them. They used the bits of antiquity that made the film attractive to its target audience and excised the rest. Maximus is fictional, but Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and Lucilla are all genuine historical figures, although their stories are highly revised. Marcus Aurelius did not name another heir, though later historians argued that he might have done better to do so. Lucilla was married to Lucius Verus and did plot against Commodus, and lost her life as a result. Commodus was finally (after attempts at poisoning) killed by a young athlete, Narcissus, though Narcissus was more likely a wrestler than a gladiator. The most startling historical inaccuracy was the film's climactic ending: the implication that Commodus' death was followed by a restoration of the republic. In fact, Commodus was followed by a quick succession of five emperors in one year, starting with Pertinax, and the empire itself continued for almost 300 years. Professor Kathleen Coleman of Harvard University was employed as historical consultant to the film, but most of her comments were politely ignored. Coleman countered by asking for her name to be removed from the credits (her credit as consultant was removed but she is still thanked by name). She has subsequently published a response to her experience that queries the balance in the relationship between historian and historical filmmaker (Coleman 2004).

Maximus is drawn as a postmodern hero for an audience much more likely to be familiar with modern popular culture than ancient history.

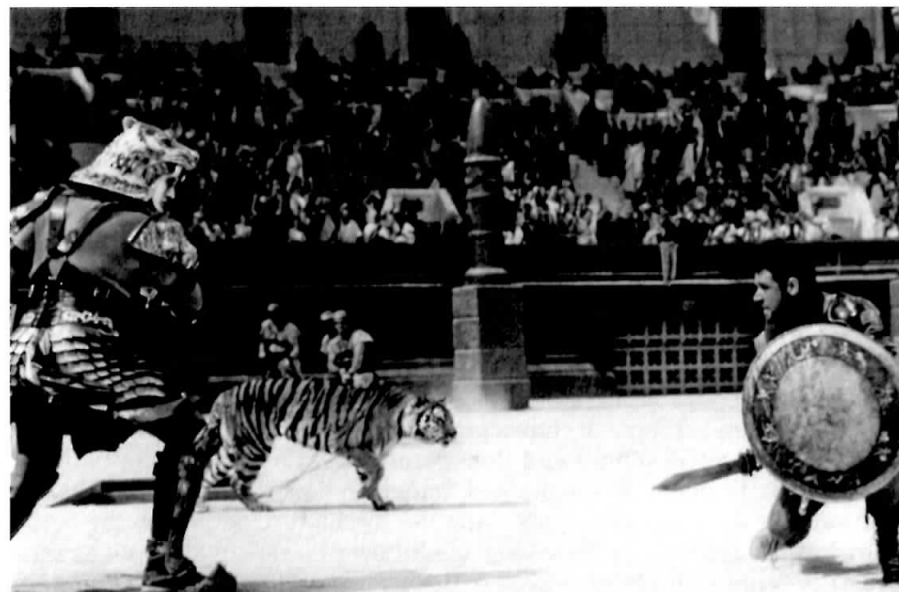
Nineteenth-century history paintings, previous films from a variety of genres and popular literature are valued as equal sources to ancient authors for the film's representations. The original scriptwriter David Franzoni cited Daniel P. Mannix's book *Those About to Die* (1958) as his inspiration. This popular history book included fictionalised narrative sections showing life from the gladiator's own viewpoint, something not found in ancient sources. Little of Franzoni's first draft remained by the time the film was released though, with major successive rewrites by two more writers (John Logan and William Nicholson) and continuous revisions during shooting. One notable alteration may also have been inspired by popular literature, albeit from an earlier tradition. Initially, the hero was named Narcissus after Commodus' historical assassin, but this was changed to Maximus, also the name of a gladiator in Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis*. Other significant aspects of narrative may be traced to the particular interests of key stakeholders. For instance, Franzoni's reputation in the film industry had been made by his role as writer of Stephen Spielberg's epic *Amistad* (1997) which described a mutiny by (African) slaves, while Solomon (2004: 13) points out that the death of the film's hero in *Gladiator* is a device previously used to great effect by director Ridley Scott in *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

The influence of Scott's previous experience is further evidenced throughout the film. His film career began in set design, and he is notoriously obsessive about props. An interesting example of this in *Gladiator* is in the decoration on the succession of breastplates worn by Maximus through the film. In the battle in Germania, when Maximus is still a loyal soldier of the empire, his breastplate features the Wolf of Rome. After he becomes a slave and gladiator, his allegiances continue to be drawn on his breastplate. In the first combat, his two horses to symbolise home; in the second, his (now dead) wife and son are added; in the third and final combat, the figure of winged Victory appears. Throughout the combats, the central image on the breastplate is a cypress tree, signifying the death he longs for. The changes are deliberate, but so small that in the earlier epic tradition when video and DVD did not exist to allow repeated close viewings, they would be most unlikely to have been noticed by cinema viewers. With the more intense and informed viewing habits of a contemporary audience however, discussion of the breastplates began on online forums within days of the film's release. Scott has also had considerable experience directing commercials through the production company he set up in 1968 with his brother Tony. The rapid cross-cutting seen in the battle and arena scenes is often cited as originating in this experience of working in advertising where high impact was required from brief sequences. In *Gladiator*, it enables a great deal of explicit violence to be included without appearing overly exploitative. We can also see the influence of his previous cinematic work, most notably *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982), science-fiction films, driven by special effects. Although on

the surface these may seem to have little in common with epic films set in antiquity, both necessitate the invention of a world simultaneously similar to, and quite different from, our own. The opportunity to 're-invent' a world was not such a new thing for *Gladiator*'s director.

Two particular iconographic sources were cited in interviews and pre-publicity for the film. In various interviews, Scott described how he was persuaded to take on the direction of the film after being shown a copy of Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting *Pollice Verso* (1872). Like other Academy painters of the nineteenth century, Gérôme often produced paintings inspired by ancient Greece and Rome, including a number set in the arena. This painting shows a triumphant gladiator, poised with his foot on the neck of his defeated opponent and awaiting the verdict of the watching emperor, seen in his box behind and to the left of the gladiator. The gladiator himself is looking at another section of the audience though, and his gaze draws ours to the same place: on the right of the picture, six Vestal Virgins stand at a ringside parapet, draped in white, protected from the cold stone by rich oriental tapestries, and unanimously gesturing for the victor to complete the kill. Their enthusiasm is repeated in the tiers of spectators shown behind them, but it is in this shocking lust for violence on the part of female spectators that the power of Gérôme's painting lies. The imagery of Academy painters has been the inspiration for many examples of cine-antiquity, and Gérôme's arena pictures, most notably both *Pollice Verso* and *The Christian Martyrs' Last Prayer* (1863-83), were among the key visual sources for art direction in other cinematic arenas as well as *Gladiator*. [Fig. 20] However, the visual iconography is less important here than the frenzied reactions of the crowd. A key narrative theme in *Gladiator* is the power of the mob, and Gérôme's painting viscerally conveys the terrifying potential of that force.

Another highly significant source was the propaganda films of Leni Riefenstahl, made in the 1930s to establish a heroic iconography for Adolf Hitler, his Nazi followers, and their vision of Aryan supremacy. One in particular is referenced, *Triumph of the Will* (1935). The film recorded the 1934 rally of the Nazi party at Nuremberg. There are extensive visual quotations to Riefenstahl's menacing and machine-like imagery in *Gladiator* in the sequence showing Commodus' triumphant entry into Rome following his accession. These include the opening swoop down through the clouds to reveal the city; in Riefenstahl's film, this shot reveals the massed followers of the Nazi party below. The final shots of the sequence have Commodus greeted on the steps of the Temple of Jupiter by a young girl bearing flowers (repeating a moment in Riefenstahl's film when a young girl gives flowers to Hitler). Two senators dominate the foreground of the shot, with their backs to the camera, while behind the young emperor are two powerful images of man's control over the world: the monumental architecture of Rome, with the Coliseum in the centre background, and the perfectly regular massed ranks of the Roman armies. This



20. The influence of Jean-Léon Gérôme, recreating the Roman arena, *Gladiator* (2000).

shot mirrors the composition of one showing Hitler's arrival; in the central position occupied by the Coliseum are three pennant swastika flags. In these identifying strategies, power (in the storyworld of the film) is equated with control of the masses, and the symbol of that power is the place where the masses are entertained, the arena.

Such detailed quotation from a film made more than sixty years previously, which could hardly be described as mainstream audience viewing, indicates Scott's ambition for *Gladiator* as a film that could be appreciated on multiple critical levels. It further suggests the filmmakers' confidence in the film's entitlement to its own legacy, especially in the opportunities for multiple and detailed viewings afforded by home viewing on video and DVD. In fact, pre-publicity for the film actively recruited the prospective cinema audience as fans rather than just viewers, knowing conspirators in the film's re-presentation of a Rome that never did, and never could exist. Articles placed in film preview magazines described Scott's explicit instructions to Mill Films who produced the special effects for the film to use Riefenstahl's film as reference in the CGI used to create the spectacle of Rome, and these articles showed how CGI had been used to simulate a crowd of thousands in the Coliseum from just a few extras. Where in the old epics there would have been an opportunity for the studios to trumpet their power and wealth with literal casts of thousands and monumental sets, *Gladiator* celebrated the new technological capabilities that made spectacular displays possible without the kind of expense that the old films

necessitated. The effects here were not hidden in an attempt to suspend the audience's disbelief – separating consumer from producer. Rather filmmakers acknowledged the new sophistication of the audience by openly inviting scrutiny of technical practices and collusion in their effects, and thus devolved some of the power previously wielded by filmmakers and the studios to cinema's viewers. This intelligent recognition of changes in the audience demographic and viewing practices was one of the aspects that made it possible to present a film that, without irony, positioned itself as an example of an almost fatally unfashionable genre.

While *Gladiator* certainly earns its place in postmodern culture with its open borrowing of a range of other cultural texts, the biggest influence on the film's iconography remains previous epic films. *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is a major source of characters (Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, and Lucilla), setting (Germania and Rome) and narrative features (a fictional soldier who is about to be named imperial heir and who has had a relationship with the emperor's daughter Lucilla). One particular scene (showing Commodus undertaking gladiatorial training in the German forest) is replicated almost exactly. However, *Gladiator* focuses on more visceral elements of the story than the weighty political discussions of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*. This is a story about the arena, and the revenge of a wronged man. Interestingly, this puts the filmmakers in the same position with regard to the viewing public as the intra-diegetic Commodus: prioritising easy gratification and entertainment over more serious matters. As viewers, we are asked to simultaneously condemn Commodus for this and conversely to praise the filmmakers. But in this paradox is the point of *Gladiator's* successful re-invention of the historical epic film. It is the job of politicians and emperors to govern and that is a serious undertaking – but the job of filmmakers is to entertain and the two should not be confused. Scott's recognition of this primary purpose of popular cinema both places *Gladiator* in the tradition of the epic films that immediately preceded it, and distinguishes it from the less successful films that followed it (in particular the all-too-portentous *Alexander*).

In addition to the specific parallels with *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, the film takes the narrative conventions of other examples of cinema's re-representation of gladiators and the arena and rethinks them for a new critically and culturally aware audience. Particular features that recur in earlier films include the hero's African 'buddy' [Fig. 21]; the salacious spectator; a scene welcoming the new gladiator to the training school; and a strong belief system for those participating in the arena. Each of these features is revised to play a significant role in defining a new moral schema for the film, utilising audience familiarity with the existing vocabulary of the genre to interrogate new anxieties about identity, heroism, masculinity, and spectatorship.

In particular, no epic film is complete without a hero. On the surface,



21. Maximus and Juba fight the beast. Scene from the provincial arena, *Gladiator* (2000).

Maximus embodies all of the features of the typical hero of a classical Hollywood Roman epic. This hero is (in this case, very soon becomes) single, leaving him free to develop a relationship with the heroine over the course of the film. Indeed, rescuing the heroine from peril is a key feature of most epic film narratives and *Gladiator* does not disappoint. The epic hero is brave and self-sacrificing, a man looked to by other men for leadership, and a skilful fighter. He is (if not at first, then certainly eventually) shown to be naturally possessed of an upright and simple code of morality. His temptation away from, and re-assumption of, this code shapes the narrative. Visually he has a well-built but not overly-muscular torso, distinguishing the epic heroes from those of the pepla, where the heroes are defined by their extreme muscle development. Aurally, he is distinguished from other, often weaker and more decadent Romans by his accent which is usually American to their British. This last might alert us to the possibility of other revisions. In *Gladiator*, the hero retains a trace of the Antipodean in his speech, while other major cast members have a variety of accents (Scandinavian, English, Celtic) – but the villain is certainly American. This subtle subversion of the usual aural scheme for epic films models the treatment

of other epic conventions used in the film, as will be shown in the closer textual analyses that follow.

The centrality of heroism in *Gladiator* is flagged up in one of the film's taglines: 'A hero will rise.' Yet as we will see, the precise nature of this heroism is complicated. Its definition will involve discussion of different versions of masculinity; the cult of celebrity and the dangers of worship by the crowd; questions about the legitimate use of violence; and the role of the family in establishing codes of morality.

### Plot summary

On the far borders of the Roman empire in Germania, imperial troops fight a successful battle against the local tribes under the leadership of Maximus Decimus Meridianus (Russell Crowe). Following the battle, Maximus plans to return to his farm in Spain where his wife and son await. However, the aging emperor Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) tells Maximus that he will name him as successor instead of his own son Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), in the hope that he will restore Rome to a republic. Meanwhile Commodus has arrived in Germania with his sister Lucilla (Connie Nielsen), an old flame of Maximus', expecting to be named as heir. When he is told that he will not succeed, he murders his father. Maximus refuses to declare his loyalty to Commodus as emperor and is taken away from the camp for execution by the new emperor's henchmen. He escapes, and despite being wounded sets out on a marathon dash back to Spain to protect his family, but on arrival discovers that both are already dead. Having buried them, he collapses from his wounds.

Maximus is found and taken by slave traders to Zucchabar, where he is bought by a gladiator trainer, Proximo (Oliver Reed), along with a young African, Juba (Djimon Hounsou). At first he refuses to fight, or even to speak. However, chained to Juba in his first combat, he rediscovers his instinct for self-preservation. Alongside the German, Hagen (Ralf Möller), they defeat their opponents, to the acclaim of the crowd. Maximus' skill in the arena makes him a local celebrity, nicknamed 'the Spaniard'. He continues to win, now fighting on his own against multiple opponents, but treats the crowd and their desire for blood with contempt. Proximo then tells him they are to fight in the Coliseum in Rome as part of Commodus' accession games, and Maximus sees his chance for revenge.

In Rome, the gladiators are sent into the arena as Carthaginians to fight a restaged 'Battle of Carthage'. Organised by Maximus to operate with military discipline, they succeed against the odds. Commodus asks to meet the gladiators, and Maximus prepares to attack him, but has to halt when Lucilla's young son, Lucius, joins his uncle. Maximus reveals his true identity and tells Commodus that he will have his revenge. That night Lucilla visits him and tries to recruit him to a plot to overthrow Commodus and restore the republic, but he refuses. His next combat is with a hitherto

undefeated gladiator, Tigris of Gaul. Commodus has arranged for tigers to be set against Maximus during the combat, but Maximus still triumphs, refusing to despatch his opponent and gaining the new nickname of 'Maximus the Merciful'.

Maximus encounters his former manservant Cicero, who tells him that the troops remain loyal to him. The former general agrees to conspire with Lucilla and the senator Gracchus, but the plot is discovered. Despite a brave fight by the gladiators, Hagen is killed and Maximus captured. Commodus tells Lucilla that she will bear his children or else he will kill Lucius. He arranges to take part himself in a final combat with Maximus, wounding him before they enter the arena to ensure his defeat. However, Maximus rouses himself for one final effort and kills the emperor. Having received the agreement of Gracchus that the republic will be restored, he dies in the expectation of a reunion with his family in the afterlife.

### Key scenes and themes

#### *Violence as entertainment*

Any epic film featuring gladiators has a paradox at its heart. It needs to attract a large audience to recoup costs, so must take a conservative approach to moral issues; this includes condemning violence, and particularly the violence as public entertainment that takes place in the arena. However, the same violence forms part of the spectacle that attracts viewers to epic films. One of the ways that cinema sidesteps this dilemma is to use the violence inevitably present in arena combats to discuss broader issues. In *Gladiator* the arena combats link to other intra-cinematic events to present ideas about acceptable contexts for violence, military training, and the nature of celebrity.

#### **'Are you not entertained?'**

In his second combat in Zucchabar, Maximus is preparing to enter the provincial arena as a single combatant. Huge crowds chant, 'Spaniard, Spaniard', and young boys clamber onto the roof of the gladiators' cage to drop rose petals. As Maximus passes along the line of gladiators, they salute and acknowledge him as 'Spaniard'. Entering the arena to more falling petals, he is met by a number of gladiators to whom he bows before commencing the combat. All of the gladiators are despatched swiftly and brutally; the last one is decapitated with two swords. The combat takes less than a minute from bow to decapitation. Maximus hurls one of the swords into the balcony where the *editore* or promoter of the games would have sat, and demands of the crowd, 'Are you not entertained? Is this not why you are here?' He throws down his remaining sword and contemptuously spits on the ground of the arena. The crowd are at first silenced by his outburst, then begin chanting again: 'Spaniard, Spaniard, Spaniard.'

Like other gladiator films, *Gladiator* draws links between violence for entertainment purposes and violence for what are classed as more legitimate purposes such as the violence of war. In other films, gladiatorial training proves invaluable for the gladiators when they find themselves fighting as soldiers. In *Spartacus* (1960), for example, training methods used in the gladiatorial school are later borrowed to train the slave army in their conflict with the Roman army. In *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) the disciplined fighting ability learnt as gladiators admits the freed slave Demetrius and the African Glycon into legitimate Roman society as Christian warriors, fighting the good fight with the support of the newly ascended emperor Claudius and his reformed empress, Messalina. In *Gladiator* this convention is subverted. It is Maximus' military training which saves him and the other gladiators in the arena. This interplay between military and arena violence is signalled at the opening of the arena sequence, when Maximus is saluted by the gladiators as 'Spaniard' as he passes them on his entry to the arena, a distorted mirror of the troops' acknowledgement of his identity as 'General' in the prelude to the battle against Germania. Other imagery from this opening battle sequence reappears in the later arena sequences to emphasise the association of military and gladiatorial combat. For example, the 'minotaur' swinging a mace that greets the gladiators on their first entrance into the provincial arena corresponds to the giant German in the battle scene, also clad in animal skins and swinging a staff at the Roman soldiers. Later Maximus uses his military experience to unite and direct the gladiators, thus beating impossible odds in the 'Battle of Carthage' staged in the Coliseum. Commodus is also shown to be a skilful fighter, undertaking gladiatorial training in the forests of Germania. However, having 'missed' the actual battle, his combat skills lack moral purpose, only being utilised in the final arena combat where the emperor is schematised as the 'evil' that threatens Maximus' 'good'.

Another kind of institutionalised violence is also referenced here, this time more modern: the bullfight. Maximus, already identified as 'the Spaniard', brings a matadorial flair to his fighting moves, bowing as he enters the arena, and twisting his body as if swerving a bull before stabbing behind his back. At one point he sticks two swords into a gladiator in an action reminiscent of the use of *banderillas* in bullfighting, small sharpened sticks stabbed into the bull's shoulders to weaken him before he is killed. This reference combines with the chaotic and emotive atmosphere of the provincial arena (quite different from the controlled Roman audiences more usually shown in cinema), to strip back ideas about the gladiator as hero and shock us into a recognition of the bloodlust (perhaps our own) at the heart of viewing violence.

Such forthright acknowledgement of violence as entertainment denies Maximus the gladiator the conventional cinematic status of hero, though he will regain it later when he rediscovers his moral purpose. His liminal state in this scene is signalled by the falling petals that greet his entry into

the arena, a classic symbol for lost innocence. Maximus' ability to deliver the brutality that the crowd demands makes him no longer a hero, but a celebrity. He is himself conscious of this status and accepts it, though not without bitterness, telling Lucilla that he has 'the power only to amuse the mob'. Lucilla's reply is that 'that is power'. The postmodern pragmatism of *Gladiator* suggests we should use power when it is offered, whatever the source. Power is no longer something that arises only from purity of motive, as suggested in *Spartacus*. Morality is found, not in how we acquire power, but in what we do with it.

#### *Watching the spectators*

Another familiar cinematic strategy for dealing with the problem of screening violence is to turn the camera from the action on the floor of the arena to the action in the stands. By taking the spectators in the arena to stand for society as a whole, violence and the desire to view it is shown as a symptom of more general societal decadence and perversion. However, such condemnation cannot be limited to the on-screen viewers; the cinema viewer must also question their own viewing habits, and what they might suggest about our own society and mores.

#### **Re-enacting the Battle of Carthage**

It is the first combat for Proximo's provincial gladiators before the Roman crowds in the Coliseum. As they enter the arena, a 360° pan gives the cinema viewer the same awe-inspiring viewpoint as the gladiators are experiencing for the first time. Like them, we marvel at the size of the Coliseum compared to the provincial arena and the vast numbers of spectators. A fanfare sounds as the emperor Commodus and his party take their seats. The crowds cheer and chant, 'Caesar! Caesar!' while Commodus acknowledges them. The gates open and the gladiators (representing the Carthaginians) are confronted by archers and spear-throwers (representing Rome), driven in chariots with bladed wheels. The point of view shifts to the stands. From among the spectators there is rising excitement and a chant of 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' As the 'Battle of Carthage' commences, the gladiators begin to work together under Maximus' command, successfully defending themselves against the odds. The camera turns towards the crowd in which both males and females shout their approval, applauding and shaking their fists. Now the gladiators begin to fight back, overturning a chariot. A woman covers her mouth in horror, while others cheer. In the imperial box, Commodus raises an eyebrow. As the chariots are one after another overturned (and one female archer sliced in half), the camera turns to show the crowd rushing forward, Commodus and Lucius included, to get a better view of the carnage. The crowd are cheering the 'Carthaginians' now, and the emperor is himself engrossed in the combat, leaning forward in his seat. As the last opponent falls, the gladiators receive the adulation of the crowd.



The explicit violence of the 'Battle of Carthage' sequence [see box: 'Re-enacting the Battle of Carthage'] is defused by fast cross-cutting between action on the floor of the arena and action in the stands, particularly in the imperial box. As film viewers, our point of view constantly changes; one moment we are amongst the gladiators, the next we are looking at the stands. At one point (and not for the first time) Scott borrows a trick from the arena sequence in *Spartacus*, giving the cinema audience a view of the action that mimics that of the arena audience of the story-world. The contrast between the dark of the stands, and the view into the light of the arena, brings to mind the voyeurism of film-viewing; as spectators, we are usually unseen onlookers. Such strategies persuasively posit an identification between spectators in the cinema and those in the arena.

For historical arena spectators in ancient Rome, such occasions would have been as much about seeing the emperor as seeing the gladiators. For the film viewer too, Commodus' appearance and actions are significant; the scene is a crucial one for the cinema audience's reading of Commodus, and particularly for his version of masculinity. It is, above all, Commodus' enthusiasm for violent combat that marks him as separate from Maximus, who avows his wish to return to a quiet home life and refuses to fight back when he first arrives at the gladiator school. In contrast, Commodus is shown treating violent combat as a leisure pastime, practising gladiatorial moves in the forests of Germania, though he has had no part in the real battle. Commodus is an especially keen spectator at the arena, shown to be highly involved and engaged with the action. At one point he makes a comedy gesture, saying 'Ooooooh!' and wagging his head and hands; at another especially gruesome killing, he sticks his tongue out in a gesture of empathetic sensuality. There are no pretensions here to imperial dignity.

Commodus' undisciplined enthusiasm when viewing violent combat takes on new meaning when viewed through the filter of previous Roman epic films, where such spectator behaviour is typically focused on as a means of defining 'good' and 'bad' women. In *The Sign of the Cross*, DeMille used close-up shots of two contrasting types of female spectators in the arena, one salaciously bloodthirsty and the other piously weeping. In *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, the empress Messalina (Susan Hayward) is driven almost to an orgasmic ecstasy watching the combats, breathing increasingly heavily and running to the parapet to make sure she does not miss the denouement (actions restaged in *Gladiator* by Commodus). In *Spartacus*, the two Roman women who have demanded a 'to the death' private arena combat are transfixed by the violence, while the male spectators are uninterested, leaning back and discussing politics. The women's bloodlust and the men's disinterest are compared with the focused concern and anxiety of the watching slave Varinia – this is framed as proper behaviour for a woman, and evidenced in *Gladiator* by the actions of Lucilla. In these earlier gladiator films, enthusiasm for watch-

ing violence marks out a female as decadent and perverted. In *Gladiator*, Scott takes the existing conventions of the genre, and uses them to serve a linked, but different purpose. The emperor is simultaneously emasculated and defeminised. He cannot measure up to Maximus' defining performance of a man but, in addition, does not even pass muster as a good woman.

#### *Family – the new religion?*

In one important respect, *Gladiator* has been generally acknowledged to be quite different from the majority of Roman epic films that preceded it. It is an epic with a complete absence of Christianity. As we have seen in previous chapters, imperial Rome as a location for early Christianity has been a major motivating factor in the popularity of the ancient world for filmmakers. Even *Spartacus* – adapted from a novel written by a Communist, with a screenplay written by a Communist sympathiser and produced and starring a supporter of Zionism – ended with a crucifixion scene widely viewed as a coded Christian narrative. However, *Gladiator's* narrative eschews religion as a force for morality, finding a substitute in our contemporary worship of the notion of family.

#### **Family prayers**

In his tent on the battlefields of Germania, Maximus is praying, following the news that Marcus Aurelius intends to name him as imperial heir. There are a number of figurines in his candlelit shrine. However it is not the gods, but his parents that he prays to. 'Ancestors, I ask for your guidance. Blessed mother, come to me with the Gods' desire for my future.' At the front of the shrine are two smaller and more rustic clay figures: his wife and son, explicitly identified here by an overlay on the screen of their 'live' images. 'Blessed father, watch over my wife and son with a ready sword. Whisper to them that I live only to hold them again.' Maximus ends his prayers, saying, 'Ancestors, I honour you. I will try to live with the dignity you have taught me.' He takes the figurine of his wife and kisses it tenderly before replacing it. It is clear that his prayers for guidance have been answered, and not entirely to his satisfaction, when he asks his manservant Cicero, 'Do you ever find it hard to do your duty?' Cicero replies, 'Sometimes I do what I want to do, and sometimes I do what I have to do', before extinguishing the candles and closing the doors of the portable shrine.

In *Gladiator*, being a hero is defined by being a good husband and father. The film uses nominal identities to build this notion. Maximus is identified by others as 'General', 'Spaniard', 'Maximus the Merciful'. His identity is even fixed by the title of the film, 'Gladiator'. But when he is called on to identify himself, he does so in terms of his family: 'husband to a murdered wife, father to a murdered son'. From beginning to end of the film, Maximus longs to be reunited with his wife and son, first in life, and

then in death. This unvarying attachment ultimately makes the resumption of his previous relationship with Lucilla (Marcus Aurelius' daughter) impossible. The film's inevitable rescue mission is not for the heroine but for her son, confirmed in Maximus' dying declaration that 'Lucius is safe now'.

Maximus' prayers to and for his mother, father, wife and son draw family as the focus for duty, loyalty, respect, and protection. The clay figurines of Maximus' wife and son play an important structural role in the film's narrative. In addition to marking the end of the film when they are buried in the sand of the arena by Juba, the surviving gladiator, they are restored to Maximus by his manservant Cicero following his second combat in Rome against Tigris the Gaul. Cicero is first seen as a spectator in the arena, seeking out Maximus as he is returned under guard to the gladiators' quarters and pressing the bag containing the figurines into his hands. This marks the turning point in Maximus' journey of moral recovery: from his despair at his family's murder and resignation to death in the arena; through the return of his instinct to fight, despite his disgust at the bloodlust of the crowd; until finally he regains purpose in his desire for revenge on Commodus. The figurines of family recall him to the notions of duty.

Counterpoints to Maximus' good husband and father are found in both Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. The former bemoans his 'failure as a father', the immediate narrative reward for this regret being his death at the hands of the son he has failed. Commodus sees the ties of family as a tool for power, attempting to recruit Maximus by calling him 'brother' and asking him to mourn 'our great father'. Having failed in this endeavour, he then extends the family metaphor to his relationship as emperor with the Roman people, telling the Senate that 'the people are my children, I am their father', before putting the weaknesses of a child-centred, instant gratification and discipline-averse society on display by giving his 'children' entertainment when they need governance. Worse still, Commodus plans to become a perverted husband, taking his own sister to his bed and even appearing to predate on his young nephew Lucius. Incest and paedophilia are modern society's particular fears; the film plays on these to promote our strong moral distaste for the villain.

The African gladiator Juba reinforces Maximus' strong drive to be reunited with his family with stories about his own family and his own desire to return to them. After Maximus regains the figurines, Juba asks him, 'Can they hear you? Your family ... in the afterlife?' And herein lies the hero's reward: reunion in death. Finally, even this resolutely religion-free film cannot completely escape a Christian reading, as Maximus the merciful sacrifices himself for the greater good, going joyously as a martyr to an afterlife where his true family awaits him.

### Suggested further viewing

*Troy* (dir. Petersen, 2004)

Menelaus' wife Helen (Diane Kruger) falls in love and elopes with Paris (Orlando Bloom), prince of Troy, while he and his brother Hector are on a peace mission. This conveniently provides the excuse her brother-in-law Agamemnon (Brian Cox), king of Mycenae, needs to invade Troy. As the expedition commences, Achilles (Brad Pitt) and his Myrmidons sack the temple of Apollo and seize its priestess Briseis (Rose Byrne). Agamemnon claims Briseis for himself, and Achilles withdraws from further combat. Paris meets Menelaus (Brendan Gleeson) in single combat but has to be rescued by Hector (Eric Bana) who kills Menelaus. In the ensuing battle, the Trojans prevail. Agamemnon returns Briseis to Achilles, but he still refuses to fight. In the next attack, Patroclus (Garrett Hedlund), Achilles' young cousin, leads the Greek defence wearing Achilles' armour, but is killed by Hector. Outraged at the death of Patroclus, Achilles kills Hector in single combat, dragging his corpse away. Priam (Peter O'Toole) goes to plead for Hector's body, returning with the corpse, Briseis and a truce. The Greeks disappear, leaving a wooden horse as an offering. After dark, Greeks hidden in the horse open the city gates and Troy is sacked. Hector's widow Andromache (Saffron Burrows) and his baby son, with Helen and Paris, escape the city via a secret passage. Achilles dies trying to save Briseis from Agamemnon whom she kills.

*Troy* took a rationalising approach to mythology and the gods, offering explanations for the supernatural. It positioned itself as an old-fashioned epic, but missed its mark in several places: its leading man was too beefy, its leading woman too insubstantial, its heroes and villains not always clearly fixed in a simple moral schema. In its promotional strategies it failed to understand *Gladiator*'s success in recruiting the audience, staying silent about its use of CGI and having to reinstate the original title after an unpopular change to *The Trojan War*. However, *Gladiator* resonated throughout the film in visual and verbal instances, including blazing balls of straw in the opening battle, Achilles' repeated cry to the Thessalians, 'Is there no one else? Is there no one else?' and, in particular, the opening narration when Odysseus asks, 'Will our actions echo across the centuries?'

*Alexander* (dir. Stone, 2004)

The film opens on the narrator, Ptolemy (Anthony Hopkins), declaring his intention to write a biography of Alexander of Macedon (Colin Farrell). Alexander's own story then begins with his boyhood, showing his education by his tutor Aristotle and the early friendships that developed with those who later became his Companions. As he grows into a young man, his relationships with his father, King Philip of Macedon (Val Kilmer) and his mother Olympias (Angelina Jolie) become increasingly complex. When

Philip is murdered by one of Alexander's Companions, Alexander becomes king of Macedon, and embarks on a successful campaign against the Persians and their king, Darius (Raz Degan). He meets and marries Roxana (Rosario Dawson), but their relationship is complicated by his continuing love for his boyhood friend Hephaestion (Jared Leto). Alexander continues his military campaign into India, but Hephaestion dies of a fever and, after receiving a wound in battle, Alexander also succumbs.

The film did not do well at the box-office in the US, though it was better received in Europe. The poor audience response in America was blamed on the moral uproar in the press and among religious and Greek nationalist groups before the film's release about its depiction of Alexander's sexuality. However, the film itself is seriously flawed, with a sprawling and not always cohesive narrative and overly large central cast. The use of broad Celtic accents by Colin Farrell playing Alexander and other key actors playing Macedonians was probably a new version of the aural paradigm mentioned previously, marking the Macedonians as outsiders, but was the source of unintentional humour for audiences and critics. At the same time, the film misses the deliberate humour that functioned in the classical Hollywood epics to defuse any pomposity. Its director, Oliver Stone, blamed the film's failure on inappropriate editing decisions, forced by anxious backers. He produced two subsequent Director's Cuts for release on DVD, the second three and a half hours long and including an intermission.

*300* (dir: Snyder, 2007)

King Leonidas of Sparta (Gerard Butler) receives an emissary from the Persian king Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro), demanding his obeisance. In return, Leonidas murders the messenger, and sets off to gain the approval of the Spartan elders for war against Persia. The ephors declare that this cannot happen until after the imminent religious festival. Knowing that a delay would be disastrous, Leonidas sets out anyway with only his personal bodyguard of 300 men. He plans to confront the Persians at the narrow pass of Thermopylae, and the Spartans prove successful at holding the massive army back against the odds. However they are betrayed by Ephialtes (Andrew Tiernan), a deformed Spartan rejected by Leonidas for his guard. Knowing that they face certain death, Leonidas sends the Spartan Dilios (David Wenham) back to Sparta to appeal to the Spartan council. Meanwhile Leonidas' wife, Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey), has responded to an attempt at blackmail by the corrupt councillor Theron (Dominic West) by killing him, revealing that he has been in the pay of the Persians. The 300 Spartans die in a shower of Persian arrows, but a postscript by Dilios shows that their actions had delayed and depleted the Persians long enough to allow the Greek city-states to unite and ultimately defeat them.

'The hit film *300* is pretty much what you'd hear from a history teacher

– if your history teacher was a pro-wrestler' (Fallow 2007: 1). As a child, Frank Miller was deeply moved by watching *The 300 Spartans* with his father. The idea of a film where all the heroes died altered his notion of heroism. Years later he returned to the theme in his graphic novel *300* (1998) which retold the life story of Leonidas from his birth to his death at Thermopylae. The film is a faithful adaptation of Miller's comic. As such it preserves the work's raw brutality and dark humour. These Spartans fight for freedom, but they hit below the belt. Miller took their buff bodies straight from the French history-painting tradition (most notably David's *Leonidas before the Battle of Thermopylae*, 1814), but their dialogue is more *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

The film aped the look of the graphic novel by using pages from the book for storyboarding, filming almost exclusively against blue screen and adding dramatically coloured backgrounds later. Extremely popular with audiences (setting several box-office records), the film was generally disliked by critics for its senseless violence and tendency to fall into cliché. It was even more unpopular with the Iranian government who took the film as a personal insult to Iranian culture. However, a few critics dared to suggest that it was the vast and powerful Persian army rather than the guerrilla-like Spartans that might best stand as a metaphor for the USA in current global conflicts.

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### 10. The Return of the Epic? *Gladiator* (2000)

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- Decline of cine-antiquity: Wyke (1997a): 183-8; Winkler (1995): 135-54; Solomon (2001a): 15.
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# CLASSICS ON SCREEN

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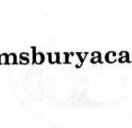
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