

# TECHNO-EUPHORIA AND THE WORLD-IMPROVING DREAM: *GLADIATOR*

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## **Abstract**

In this essay, I explore the potential of the epic genre as a form of transnational cinema, and reconsider its traditional role as a vehicle of national ideology and aspirations. I suggest that the contemporary historical epic conveys a sense of double-voicing by adapting epic themes usually associated with national narratives to collectivities that are not framed by nation. Reading the epic alongside the work of Giorgio Agamben, I draw particular attention to the ways that the contemporary epic foregrounds the potential of “bare life” as a form of historical agency, emphasizing the emergence of the multitude and the mongrel community. I also consider the particular formal characteristics of the epic film—its design-intensive mise-en-scène, its use of spectacle and its style of sensory expansiveness—as producing an affective and emotional relation to the historical past, creating a fullness of engagement and amplitude of consciousness.

Keywords: epic film; national ideology.

With the recent release of several films set in the ancient and Mediaeval past, the epic has once again become a major genre in contemporary cinema, providing a striking example of the resiliency

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of genre forms, their ability both to recall past usages and respond to the present in a new way. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes, genres serve as “organs of memory” for particular cultures; they both “remember the past and make their resources available to the present.”<sup>1</sup> The return of the epic in the contemporary period, a period marked by heightened and conflicting appeals to national, ethnic, religious and cross-cultural forms of belonging, presents a particularly compelling subject for critical analysis and invites a broad reconsideration of the form from a variety of perspectives. Among several questions to be considered is the link between the epic and the imagined community of nation, and whether this link remains the defining feature of the epic film. Traditionally framed as an expression of national emergence and national consciousness and strongly associated with the category of national cinemas, the contemporary epic, with its complex array of nested and overlapping production and distribution arrangements has become the very exemplar of transnational modes of film production.<sup>2</sup> This dual aspect gives the contemporary epic a kind of holographic ambiguity, a genre that shows one face when looked at from one angle and another when viewed from a different perspective. The contrast between the evolving global context of film production and reception – a global reshaping more apparent in the epic than in almost any other genre form—and its particular provenance as an expression of national mythology and aspirations provides an intriguing instance of what Bakhtin calls “double-voicing” – the adapting of an older genre to a new context.

In this essay, I wish to explore the potential of the epic genre as a form of transnational cinema, and to reconsider its traditional role as a vehicle of national ideology and aspirations. Placing special emphasis on the film *Gladiator*, I suggest that the contemporary historical epic conveys a sense of double-voicing by adapting epic themes usually associated with national narratives to collectivities that are not framed by nation. Although many contemporary critics have described newer epic films, and *Gladiator* in particular, as an expression of a new kind of American globalcentrism, an aesthetic ratification of a new form of

empire, I would like to consider an alternative approach.<sup>3</sup> Reading the epic alongside the work of Giorgio Agamben, I draw particular attention to the ways that the contemporary epic foregrounds the potential of “bare life” as a form of historical agency, emphasizing the emergence of the multitude and the mongrel community.<sup>4</sup> I argue that this theme speaks to an alternative understanding of being in history. I will also consider the particular formal characteristics of the epic film—its design-intensive *mise-en-scène*, its use of spectacle and its style of sensory expansiveness. In contrast to the general understanding of epic spectacle as a device for inspiring awe and soliciting consent, I suggest that the spectacular form and effects of the epic may better be read as producing an affective and emotional relation to the historical past, creating, paradoxically, a fullness of engagement and amplitude of consciousness. Roland Barthes compares the experience of viewing the widescreen epic as akin to “standing on the balcony of History,” and describes the stretched-out frontality of the epic screen as “the ideal space of the great dramaturgies.”<sup>5</sup> This description echoes Vivian Sobchack’s view of the epic as dramatizing “the carnal experience of history” a phenomenological sense of “being in history.”<sup>6</sup> Here, I argue that the kinaesthetic experience of epic cinema, its plenary amplitude, conveys not only imperial nostalgia but also a powerful sense of anticipatory consciousness.

Traditionally, epic films have been understood as particularly vivid expressions of the myth-making impulse at the core of national identity. The combination of myth and history in the epic film, the layering of “what might have been” over “what actually occurred” produces a narrative structure that derives from real events, but transmutes the elements of the historical past into an inspirational form, “trading on received ideas of a continuing national or cultural consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> One writer has said that “true film epics can only be made at a time when a country’s national myths are still believed—or when a nation feels itself slipping into decline, which produces a spate of nostalgic evocations of those myths.”<sup>8</sup> This is especially evident in critical discussion of the American historical epic. As Gilles Deleuze writes,

“the American cinema constantly shoots and reshoots a single fundamental film, which is the birth of a nation-civilization ... it and it alone is the whole of history, the germinating stock from which each nation-civilization detaches itself as an organism, each prefiguring America. In his reading, the Hollywood epic communicates “via the peaks” with the great civilizations of the past, discovering in them a prefiguration of America, an anticipation of the nation to come.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Rome was often taken as a metaphor for the grandeur of Hollywood itself, its glamour and aesthetic innovation, with ancient Rome in many films serving as a privileged subject for the spectacular display of the technological superiority of Hollywood cinema. As Michael Wood writes, Hollywood’s histories of Rome are “a huge, many faceted metaphor for Hollywood itself.”<sup>10</sup> And as Maria Wyke further comments,

The projection of ancient Rome on screen has functioned not only as a mechanism for the display or interrogation of national identities but also, and often in contradiction, as a mechanism for the display of cinema itself – its technical capacities and its cultural value ... Ancient Rome has been constantly reinvented to suit new technologies for its cinematic narration and new historical contexts for the interpretation of the Roman past in the present.<sup>11</sup>

On this model, *Gladiator* would seem to exemplify the continuing importance of ancient Rome as a mechanism for the display of national identities and cinematic technique. Its extraordinary Colosseum and battle sequences, its dramatic narrative arc depicting the progress of the title character from general, to slave-leader of a mongrel population of gladiators, to “protector of Rome” in his final moments, and its dualistic projection of both punitive authority and humanitarian beneficence, all rendered with spectacular technological virtuosity, seem designed to evoke an emerging national mythology. On this reading, the film appears to reinvent the Roman past in order to express the “legitimation

of the imperial machine," what one critical theorist describes as a "neo-epic mode of global enchantment, spectacular violence, and mass circulation." Rob Wilson asks if *Gladiator* was not, implicitly, "so much a representation of the Roman Empire but a blasted allegorization of the Pax Americana itself in its neo-liberal mode of moral innocence, global ratification, and soft hegemony."<sup>12</sup> The film vividly expresses, for many critical theorists, the workings of the current regime of postmodern U.S. globalization, a regime characterized, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, not by the old state form of land-bound imperialism but rather by a fundamentally new form of rule, in which the proliferation of difference, hybridity, and the decentered aspects of contemporary life are encouraged, captured and managed through the mass media and the internet.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the initial images of the film seem to direct us to read the narrative in terms of the constellation of Rome, Hollywood, global enchantment, and new forms of imperial power. Beginning with its production logos, the film unfolds its imperial history under the signs of reverie, enchantment and global reach, communicated explicitly by the DreamWorks logo that initiates the film and by the spinning globe of the Universal Studios that follows. The DreamWorks logo and the Universal globe are here colored in tones of antique gold and black — a change from the customary primary colors that both studios traditionally employ.<sup>14</sup> The Universal ribbon that circles out from behind the globe is also colored in antique gold. Following the logo sequence, the film begins with a fade-in to a misty, dull red background, the sound of a female voice singing a song of mourning, and an inscription: "At the height of its power, the Roman Empire was vast, stretching from the deserts of Africa to the borders of Northern England. Over one quarter of the world's population lived and died under the rule of the Caesars.... Just one final stronghold stands in the way of Roman victory and the promise of peace throughout the empire." Here, the logo sequence followed by the historical epigraph form a striking parallel construction: Hollywood and Rome both encircle the world, one empire seamlessly

flowing into the other, a point underlined, it seems to me, by the shift to the present tense in the middle of the passage.

Following *Gladiator's* opening epigraph, a tracking shot follows a man in close-up walking through a burnished wheat field with his hand held out grazing the tops of the stalks. The song, which sounds like a dirge or lament, continues over these images, as the distant sound of children's laughter and the sound of wind carries the shot along. Suddenly, we cut to a frontal shot of Maximus, the main character of the film, standing quietly in a burned field, a shot that has a cold, blue look that creates a sharp contrast with the warm hues of the wheat field in the earlier tracking shot. A Spanish guitar is heard on the soundtrack. Maximus is dressed for battle, and his face is grimy, unshaven, and resolute.

The opening sequence associates Maximus with the natural world of wheat fields and children's voices, with the earth that he rubs into his hands before battle and the bird that lands near him. But he is also associated with the imagery of war, the smoke and ash and the song of mourning that we hear on the soundtrack. It thus condenses in an exemplary way the tones of "moral innocence" and punitive authority, the innocence of the natural order and the implicit violence of empire. Seeming to evoke what one writer calls the "imperial humanitarianism" of the new global order, the sequence describes Maximus with contradictory connotations.<sup>15</sup> In this version of the Roman epic, the empire is identified not as it usually is with decadence, sickness and death, but with the promise of peace; far from the "fatally stricken," diseased Rome of *Spartacus*, described in that film's initial voice-over as poisoned at its core — "And even at the zenith of her pride and power, the republic lay fatally stricken with a disease called human slavery" — Rome is here one victory away from attaining "peace throughout the empire." And from the opening moments of the film, Maximus is defined as the agent of this historical process. Although he is portrayed in a static portraiture shot, with a troubled expression on his face, the residue of tradition clings to his figure: the epic past is crystallized in his powerful build, in his contemplative gaze, and in

his evident stature in the narrative world, signified by the framing, cutting, and camera movement with which he is introduced.

From the perspective described above, *Gladiator* could be seen to crystallize the cultural tone of what Hardt and Negri describe as a “fundamentally new form of rule.”<sup>16</sup> Its teleology is not the usual endpoint of epic films, for as one critic says, “Romans no longer need to turn into Christians in order to remain interesting to an American audience.”<sup>17</sup> Rather, it speaks to another kind of imperialism, a “soft hegemony” where diversity, difference and hybridity are encouraged and cultivated, and where the global reach of the mass media solicits consent.<sup>18</sup>

But another message can be sensed in the opening as well, a message that has found its way into certain cultural responses to the film, and that I would like to highlight here as a motif that might lead to another type of reading. What is unusual about the logo, epigraph and opening sequence in *Gladiator* is the somber, melancholy mood that the opening communicates, as if the film were a collective commemoration ritual, the recalling of an ancient past not in order to express a triumphal communication with the Roman empire via the peaks, but rather to express a contemporary sense of foreboding and crisis. Rather than conveying a new “master-narrative of enlightened imperialism,” as Wilson would have it, *Gladiator*, released in the year 2000, seems to foreshadow the crisis of national identity and modern social structures catalyzed by the events of 9/11.

The figure of Maximus, and the film itself, have been inscribed in American culture in a particularly complex and resonant way. Maximus, for example, became a popular figure in body art in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, with the figure of the gladiator assuming a particular value as an icon of honor and mourning. The imagery associated with *Gladiator*, integrated into the shield and battalion imagery of firefighters, became a favored way of memorializing fallen firefighters, and the slogan “Strength and Honor”, featured in the film, became a popular inscription in tattoos.<sup>19</sup> A more complete indexing of borrowed and repurposed imagery from the film would undoubtedly reveal an extensive array of narratives and discourses in which the film has been

inscribed. What I wish to emphasize here is one of the ways that *Gladiator* has been connected to a powerful and particular moment of national anxiety and trauma, to a changing concept of nation, and to surprising acts of solidarity with the past. The relationship between commemoration, collective mourning, and body modification, including tattooing and scarification, circulating within the cultural responses to *Gladiator*, suggests that the imagery and narrative messages of the contemporary epic are open to appropriation in ways that are not limited by nationalistic or imperialistic expressions, but rather may serve different, vernacular needs.

### Writing the body

The extensive literature on tattooing and scarification emphasizes its connection to liminal moments of social and historical crisis; the popularity of tattooing peaks during periods of cultural, social and religious upheaval. In some cultures, tattoos are regarded as magical, an invocation against death and an expression of the desire for rebirth, a theme that is patently present in the imagery popular in tattoos seen after 9/11. Much of the commentary on tattoos after 9/11 describes them as a form of solace, as “medicinal,” and as “a public declaration of loss, defiance, and survival,” themes that link them explicitly to blood rituals of inclusion and community, to the idea of passage through ordeal, to a kind of “writing on the body by experience,” and to remembrance and commemoration.<sup>20</sup> Here, the practice of tattooing speaks to an alternative understanding of being in history. As Kim Hewitt writes, tattoos and body scarification are “acts that asked to be witnessed.”<sup>21</sup>

The popularity of *Gladiator* as a source of imagery for tattoos – one of the best known ink parlors in New York is named “Maximus Tattoos” —brings into relief certain aspects of the film that have not yet been explored in the critical literature. Considered in terms of this kind of vernacular recoding, the film’s narrative takes on a different coloration than that described by many critical theorists, one of blood ritual and commemoration, of identities constructed outside the dominant

discourse. The vernacular response to the film, with its emphasis on the physical, somatic re-experiencing of loss and remembrance, suggests that for some audiences its narrative patterning and imagery are deeply interwoven with a sense of the physical, corporeal body. Rather than seeing the film as a “new master narrative of enlightened imperialism,” I suggest, following Vivian Sobchack, that *Gladiator* may be understood as an epic film that provides a carnal and subjective ground for historical reflection, an embodied sense of history.<sup>22</sup>

In a well-known essay, Paul Willeman writes about the voyeuristic pleasure involved in viewing the male figure in film, and describes the way certain film genres typically display the male body: “The viewer’s experience is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male ‘exist’ (that is, walk, move, ride, fight) in or through cityscapes, landscapes, or more abstractedly, history. And on the unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated . . . and restored through violent brutality.”<sup>23</sup> The spectacle of the male figure riding, fighting, or moving “through history” is of course the keystone of the epic cinema, along with the violent brutality that finds the male hero first mutilated and then symbolically restored.<sup>24</sup>

The complex messages that coalesce around the body in epic films are typically understood in terms of dualisms: the pleasure of seeing the body “exist,” and the “unquiet pleasure” of seeing the body mutilated; the body portrayed as exultant or abject; the body conceived as “Roman,” or “animal,” as Ina Rae Hark describes images of masculinity in *Spartacus*.<sup>25</sup> I would like to extend these dualisms in another direction by reading the epic alongside the work of the contemporary theorist Giorgio Agamben, who stresses, in ancient Roman law, the surprising dualism and mutual implication of “bare life” and “sovereignty” in the figure named as “homo sacre.”<sup>26</sup> In Agamben’s work, the value and importance of what he calls “bare life,” creaturely life, a life that exists outside the established juridical or religious order, emerges in its close relation to sovereignty: the two terms are intertwined and mutually defining, like “animal” and “Roman” in *Spartacus*. Although his argument for bare life serving as the ground of sovereignty in Roman law is too complex to detail here,

his example of a contemporary instance of bare life and its implications for sovereignty is relevant. The refugee, he writes, represents a contemporary form of "homo sacre," or bare life, a figure that exists without the protections of citizenship, religion, or national obligation. The rights of the refugee have value only in the form of "basic human rights," and as such the refugee brings the sovereign nature of human life, bare life, to the fore. He is "homo sacre," set apart, outside the national political or religious order, excluded from juridical or religious authority, and thus, paradoxically, claims the status of "the man of rights."<sup>27</sup>

In the epic film, the value of bare life is foregrounded in the physical, creaturely body that is such a key part of the epic form, in the bodies of the masses of slaves and subalterns, in the great crowds of the marginal and excluded. The ethical and moral message of the epic film seems to be centered in the depiction of bare life, seen as the repository of collective identity, moral gravity, and historical change. Typically, the epic hero gains the authority, the mandate to complete his quest only after becoming one with the multitude, falling into slavery, becoming a nomad, drawing from the multitude a heightened sense of purpose and nobility. What I would like to argue here is the extent to which *Gladiator*, and other epic films as well, render the value and the rights of bare life, and create from bare life the position of sovereign authority that would seem to be its opposite. In *Gladiator*, this is literalized, as Maximus begins the narrative as a near sovereign, descends to the underworld of the community of gladiators, and reemerges as the embodiment of sovereign power. But the general cultural resonance of this dualism of bare life and sovereignty is powerfully present in the vernacular responses to the film as well, for the value of life in its most naked and vulnerable form reappears in acts of performative identification such as those described above as a writing on the body.

It is in this light that we can read the relationship of Maximus and Juba, the African gladiator who heals Maximus' wounded arm. Terribly wounded in his struggle with the Roman execution squad, Maximus follows Juba's instruction to let maggots eat away the infected flesh;

Juba then embeds the wound with healing paste. Soon afterward, Maximus performs self-surgery on his own tattoo, erasing his identification with the Roman legions. From this point forward, the film weaves together the stories of Maximus and Juba, a device that is reflected in the interweaving of musical styles in the film's soundtrack which increasingly features African and Asian motifs. Chained together in the ring in one early scene, Maximus and Juba must fight as one in order to survive. Shadowing each other's movements, the two gladiators are virtuosos, performing a spectacular, choreographic duet in which they devastate their opponents, devise a new weapon from the chain that binds them, and arouse the crowd to frenzy.

In the black-white pairing of Maximus and Juba, the motif of "bare life" takes on a specifically contemporary accent; the traditional epic themes—the emergence of a people, the birth of a nation, the fulfillment of a heroic destiny – are here rewritten to express a story of emergence in which black and white are connected by a central thread. The scenes among the gladiators emphasize the cross-cultural, multi-ethnic composition of the school of gladiators, a population drawn from the radial points of the Empire—Africa, Spain, Gaul, and Germania. The gladiator-slaves here might be seen as a kind of counter-Empire, a mongrel mixture of nomads and remnants, a focus that "pushes through empire to come out the other side," naming and dramatizing a force of resistance in the ancient, and by extension, in the contemporary world.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to the conventional reading of the epic as a nation-centered text, I suggest that the hybrid composition of the multitude here, its emphasis on cross-cultural connection, can be read as a force of resistance, and that the epic film might be read against the grain as a counter-imperial genre. Rather than an expression of national triumphalism, the epic may be considered as a focused dramatization of social and historical crisis that foregrounds the prospect of bare life as an agent of change. In the case of *Gladiator*, the film powerfully responds to what Ernesto Laclau describes as a current, if inchoate, political sensibility characterized by a plurality of identities and points of rupture.<sup>29</sup> It captures the contemporary drama of empire and the difficulty of resistance. And

while for many critics it seems to be at one with the very type of imperial order I maintain it is directed against, the film also offers a scenario of political recognition in scenes that “ask to be witnessed.”<sup>30</sup>

This idea is exemplified in *Gladiator* in the striking reversal of sovereign power that takes place in the arena. Here, bare life and sovereignty are portrayed as interconnected and mutually defining, emblematically expressed in the proximity of Commodus and Maximus. Physically linked in the arena, the interconnection of the two main characters in the film defines sovereignty in a way that clarifies its basis and enacts its reversal. Considered in these terms, the penetrating critique of the film offered by Rob Wilson—“a post-imperialist vision of expanding horizons and proliferating differences, all somehow ecstatically enlisted and conscripted into the free market of commodity culture”—seems one-sided.<sup>31</sup>

The proximity of sovereignty and bare life in Agamben’s work is a deeply subversive concept, one that binds the sovereign to the mongrel community in a way that undermines the usual hierarchies of power. The complex reversal, or better, the deconstruction of sovereignty described by Agamben is expressed in a direct way in the relationship of Maximus and Commodus. Here, Maximus emblemizes the condition of bare, naked life: he erases his identity, becomes wholly incorporated into the raw, creaturely life of the gladiators—a point made manifest as blood from slaughtered animals is dripped onto his body on his way to his first gladiatorial contest—and becomes known simply as “Spaniard.” From a position of near sovereignty at the beginning of the film—the favorite of Marcus Aurelius and the designated “protector of Rome”—Maximus has now become, in a certain way, the embodiment of what Agamben calls “homo sacre,” a man without an identity, stripped of status, occupying the margins, both geographically and politically, of Roman life. Paradoxically, through this lack of identity, he gains access to the equalizing power of spectacle, similar to the way Agamben describes refugees in the contemporary period gaining “rights” through media visibility, a turn that puts a very different complexion on the usual association of mass spectacle and political

manipulation. Now the favorite of the Roman populace, Maximus can no longer be executed, he is not subject to religious sacrifice, and as Commodus says, he “simply will not die!”

Maximus frustrates the sovereign power of Commodus, which is exercised primarily in the power over life and death. After defeating the celebrated gladiator, “the Tiger of Gaul,” in an especially sensationalized event, Maximus also defeats Commodus in the visible exercise of his sovereign authority. Despite Commodus’ command of “thumbs down,” Maximus appropriates the sovereign gesture by sparing the life of his abject opponent. Here, he extends the sovereign gesture of sparing life, recalling to the Roman citizens in the Colosseum the basis of sovereignty, the power to grant an exception to bare life. The Roman audience immediately starts chanting, “Maximus the Merciful,” a phrase that effectively shifts the sovereign power of exception from Commodus to Maximus, as if bare life and mongrel community has here pushed through to take up the position of sovereignty.

### **Techno-euphoria and the world-improving dream**

This reversal of sovereignty and bare life, which forms what Deleuze would call the film’s ethical-critical core, is a deeply resonant theme in epic cinema, a variation on the theme of collective emergence that privileges bare life as a source of renewal.<sup>32</sup> Yet this powerful message in *Gladiator*, which I take as an expression of possibility for what Hardt and Negri call a “new social body beyond Empire,” is mitigated and obscured for many critics by its overpowering sonic intensity, kinaesthetic action, and choreographic camera work.<sup>33</sup> Many contemporary critics understand the climactic scenes of spectacle in *Gladiator* in terms of a direct projection of dominant political values. Characterizing the film in terms of the “hegemonic technology of sublime spectacle” or as the “techno-euphoric reign of aestheticized spectacles of empire,” writers such as Wilson and White equate *Gladiator* with the strategies and values of the dominant political culture, specifically the projection of U.S. cultural and military hegemony across

the globe. Emphasizing parallels between its portrait of Imperial Rome and the imperial globalization of the American political, cultural, and military orders, Wilson characterizes *Gladiator* as the “legitimation of the imperial machine.”<sup>34</sup> The message communicated by the film, in this reading, is a message concerning the new forms of imperialism characterized as “soft hegemony,” expressed through Maximus’ identification with subaltern groups, and the incorporation of the peripheries and mongrel populations into the new global order. But these “soft” messages, in his view, are contained within an overarching discourse of domination and imperialism, as the technological and cultural superiority of the dominant culture is happily reaffirmed in sublime orchestrations of unprecedented visual spectacle.

Equating spectacular form with displays of globalizing technological prowess, Wilson and White recognize the visceral appeal of the epic, its sense of “surge and splendor,” as Sobchack describes it, but they understand its aesthetic and affective potential only in negative terms. From another perspective, however, the emotional appeal of spectacular form in *Gladiator* suggests a particularly vivid example of what Jane Gaines calls the “utopianizing effect” of cinematic aesthetics.<sup>35</sup> Here, I would like to consider the design-intensive form of the epic in a different, more positive light, arguing that the magnifications of scale, the virtuosity of special effects, the detonations of violence and the climaxes of color so characteristic of the form create what Gaines calls a utopianizing effect and what Sobchack has called “a carnal experience of history” in film. The concept of epic film as a carnal embodiment of history, accessed here through potent kinaesthetic imagery and scenes of spectacle provides a way of understanding *Gladiator* that complicates the reading of the film as “imperial nostalgia ... Empire as spectacle and simulacrum.”<sup>36</sup>

Gaines develops an extended argument concerning the utopian messages of certain cinematic forms and techniques, referring specifically to the panorama, the magnification of scale, the wide-screen proportions and the epic magnificence of classic cinema. Drawing on the dialectical approach to mass culture forms associated with Fredric

Jameson and Stuart Hall, she emphasizes how the products of the entertainment industry have been understood dialectically in cultural studies and in film studies, displaying a productive tension between the ideological and the utopian, “the forces of containment and the forces that cannot be contained.”<sup>37</sup> For most theorists, the balance of the argument falls on the side of the ideological. But in the pioneering work of the Frankfurt School theorist Ernst Bloch the power of mass cultural forms to create a “hope landscape,” or a “world-improving dream” are endorsed as strategic, a way to pull “the world improving aspirations out of the society itself and play them back to us.” In Bloch’s work, the film can be a “mirror of hope [that portrays] the mime of the days which change the world,” a point that is very much in keeping with the epic form’s concentration on what might have occurred, rather than on what actually did occur.<sup>38</sup>

In an argument that echoes and extends Bloch’s and Gaines’ ideas, Sobchack considers the epic film’s extended length, monumentality of scale and accumulation of detail as creating a phenomenological impression of “being in history,” an impression of being immersed in the flow of historical time and space: “our sense of historicity ... begins in our reflexive existence as *embodied subjects*. It is as carnal as well as cultural beings that we presently sit in a movie theater to see a representation of past events and somehow get caught up in a comprehension of time.”<sup>39</sup> Where Barthes poetically describes the experience of watching the widescreen epic as like “standing on the balcony of history,” Sobchack makes a larger point.<sup>40</sup> The Hollywood historical epic, she writes, “can be considered as the form best able to represent the subjectively lived time of its particular cultural moment as objectively ‘historical’ [by] constructing a particular and contingent sense of ‘being-in-History.’”<sup>41</sup> Rather than an emblem of technical and cultural dominance and the aesthetic ratification of a new empire, the sublime spectacle offered by epic cinema becomes, in this reading, a way of accessing the somatic, physical apprehension of being in history, the burning in of experiences in a way that links us to other times and other places. Gaines and Sobchack both offer a critically sophisticated

defense of the role of spectacle in film, one that I think is useful for reminding us of the “utopianizing dream” that is often forgotten in contemporary accounts.

Implicit in all of this is the sense that spectacle is crucial to the affective sense of history that is produced in the epic; the physicality of the genre, its imposing sets and accumulations of detail create a phenomenological impression of “being in history”—a quality that is very much in evidence even in critical discussions of *Gladiator*. Characterizing this affective dimension in negative terms, Wilson says: “*Gladiator* helps to make this amorphous Empire palpable as a global structure of feeling. The movie ... secures consent to its military machine not so much via domination and plunder as via aesthetic ratification, mediated trauma, and modes of civilian awe.”<sup>42</sup> The scene of Commodus’ entry into the Forum seems to validate his point. Drawing explicitly from Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, the camera descends from the clouds to reveal Commodus riding a chariot through a massed, excited crowd. Commodus arrives at the steps of the Senate to be greeted by children with flower bouquets, and a population gathered below—another direct quote from Riefenstahl’s film. Moreover, the film’s depiction of the Roman Forum, as Arthur Pomeroy points out, with its Senate at one end and the Colosseum at the other, flanked by massive buildings and columns that dwarf the human population, is visually similar to the planned architecture of “Germania,” Hitler’s grandiose vision for a new Berlin.<sup>43</sup> Here, the massive set, the crowds of extras, the camera’s sweeping movement accomplished through the use of CGI evoke the Roman past in a way that echoes the imagery and the use of spectacle associated with the Third Reich, a point reinforced by other elements of the film’s iconography, such as the eagle standards, the black uniforms of the Praetorian Guard, and even the motto of the legions, “Strength and Honor,” which bears an uncomfortable similarity to the Nazi slogan “Blood and Honor.”

The film’s use of spectacle, however, can also be seen in terms of Bloch’s “mirror of hope,” and “world-improving dream.” It dramatizes

the replacing of a pathogenic historical structure with an exemplary one. Rome is depicted here as a society made in the image of its crimes, an Empire whose excesses and pathologies have been concentrated in the spectacle of the Colosseum. The spectacle of the Colosseum, however, is also depicted as the source of its renewal, the place from which it is issued a pardon. In the intensive focus on the action of the duel between Commodus and Maximus, it is as if the spectacle itself actualizes the possibility of regeneration. Spiraling down to this one moment of action, the film defines the space of the Colosseum, the action of the duel, and the gaze of the Roman spectators as the essence of an epoch, the concentrated and distilled point of Roman history. Spiraling out, it also suggests a new milieu, a new situation: the film uses the spectacle of the Colosseum to create an "originary world," to use Deleuze's expression, one that places the senators, the gladiators, the Praetorian Guard, the nobility, the slaves, and the citizens of Rome all on the same level platform, a world that departs from the historical setting of the ancient past and confers on Rome a different future.

These scenes can clearly be read as examples of sublime spectacle, designed to solicit a kind of voyeuristic consent from its cinematic audience. But with the perspective opened up by Bloch, it seems that a different reading is equally available as an interpretive response. This duality is expressed succinctly in the film's closing shots, which depict Juba burying Maximus' family figurines in the sand of the Colosseum. Here the film both recalls Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, with its close-up shot of Jesse Owens digging a sprinter's toehold in the dirt, as well as suggesting what Deleuze calls the "germinating stock, the germs of new life," a condensed expression of Bloch's wishful action or wishful landscape.<sup>44</sup> *Gladiator* stands as a particularly vivid example of the mixture of hegemonic fantasy and its counter-force in popular films, specifically, the dualism of imperial nostalgia and anticipatory consciousness that defines the epic film. In the contemporary period, in which global cultural narratives are being rewritten from various directions, the epic film can again be seen as a key form of symbolic expression.

## Notes

1. For discussion of the concept of "genre memory," see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press): 278 – 297.
2. The production of *Gladiator*, for example, involves location shooting on two continents and four countries, Morocco, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Malta. The cast of the film provides perhaps the most vivid example of the transnational character of epic film production; the main actors come from Denmark (Connie Nielsen), Senegal (Djimon Hounsou) the United Kingdom (Richard Harris and Oliver Reed), the United States (Joaquin Phoenix), and New Zealand (the part-Maori Russell Crowe).
3. See Rob Wilson, "Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* and the spectacle of empire: global/local rumblings inside the Pax Americana." *European Journal of American Culture*, 21 (2): pp.62-73. See also Brian J. White, "American Beauty, *Gladiator*, and the New Imperial Humanitarianism." *Global Media Journal*, 1 (1): pp. 1-36.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacre: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
5. See Roland Barthes, "On CinemaScope," trans. by Jonathon Rosenbaum. Jonathon Rosenbaum and James Morrison (<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v313/barth.html>). (First published in *Les lettres nouvelles*, February 1954). James Morrison's illuminating analysis of Barthes' very short essay is particularly interesting.
6. Vivian Sobchack, "Surge and Splendor: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic," *Representations* 29 (Winter, 1990): 24-49.
7. Derek Elley, *The Epic Film*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul): 13. Elley quotes Aristotle who remarks, in the essay *On the Art of Poetry*, that the epic poet's job is "not to say what *has* happened but what *could* happen."
8. Allan Barra quotes the British critic Paul Coates in "The Incredible Shrinking Epic," *American Film* 14, no. 5 (March 1989): 40-45.
9. Gilles Deleuze, "The Action-Image: The Large Form" in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 141-159. Deleuze is eloquent in his description of the epic film, defending of the historical conception underpinning the genre. Finding that the epic film sets forth a "strong and coherent conception of universal history," he analyzes the

structure of the epic as consisting of three interlocking aspects, the monumental, the antiquarian, and the ethical.

10. Michael Wood, *America in the Movies: Or "Santa Maria it had Slipped my Mind."* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975): 173 and 166-177.
11. Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (Routledge, 1997): 338. Wyke writes that Hollywood's Roman history films are an extension of a long tradition of borrowing from the Roman past in order to crystallize and critique aspects of the nation-state, a tradition exemplified by the architecture of Washington DC, which is modeled on the Roman Forum, and the numerous depictions of George Washington in a toga, holding a Roman-style scroll. The decadence and opulence of ancient Rome, however, was also emphasized by early writers, who warned that the social inequalities in the fledgling nation-state could lead to a fate similar to Rome's. Hollywood films set in Rome typically exploit these contradictions, depicting ancient Rome as a site of both ideal civic virtue as well as of decadent excess and imperial domination.
12. Rob Wilson, 63-64.
13. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).
14. See Paul Grainge on history and logo sequences in "Branding Hollywood: Studio Logos and the Aesthetics of Memory and Hype," *Screen* 45 (4) 2004: 344-362.
15. Brian J. White, "American Beauty, *Gladiator*, and the New Imperial Humanitarianism." *Global Media Journal*, 1 (1): pp. 1-36.
16. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, p. 146.
17. Brian J. White, p. 24.
18. Rob Wilson, p. 63.
19. Coco McPherson, "That Was Then, This is Now," *Rolling Stone*, (New York, Sept. 19, 2002, Iss. 905): 90-96.
20. Tara Godvin, "Tattoos become personal memorials to Sept. 11 and most loved ones," [www.Boston.com](http://www.Boston.com).

21. Kim Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997).
22. Vivan Sobchack, "Surge and Splendor." See also, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (University of California Press, 2004).
23. Paul Willeman, "Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male," *Framework* 15/16/17, (Summer, 1981): 18.
24. Friedrich Nietzsche found a similar appeal in epic literature as well. Writing about the "will to power" displayed in the Greco-Roman fascination with agonistic battle, he stresses "the visual stimulation of seeing muscular bodies in vigorous exertion, defying death and injury." See *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome*, Ekhart Koehne, Cornelia Egwigleben, and Ralph Jackson, eds. (London: British Museum Press, 2000): 47.
25. Ina Rae Hark, "Animals or Romans: Looking at Masculinity in *Spartacus*," ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, *Screening the Male* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 151-172.
26. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacre: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
27. The authority of the sovereign, based on the division between his citizen-subjects and the excluded other, outside the law, is challenged by the refugee, who represents the "bare life" within. In Agamben's formulation, the refugee, or "homo sacre" in the ancient formulation, cannot be executed or sacrificed. Not "worthy" of religious sacrifice, and not a "citizen" who can be tried by law; he can be killed but not executed by the state or sacrificed by religion. In fact, his "basic human rights," his bare life, requires – obliges — an exception on the part of the sovereign.
28. Hardt and Negri, p. 206.
29. Ernesto Laclau, "Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?" in *The Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*. Paul Passavant and Jodi Dean, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2004): 21-31.
30. Kim Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body*. (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997.)
31. Rob Wilson, p. 72.

32. See Gilles Deleuze, pp. 141-148.
33. Hardt and Negri, p. 206.
34. Rob Wilson, p. 71.
35. Jane M. Gaines, "Dream/Factory," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds. (London: Arnold, 2000): 100-113.
36. Rob Wilson, p. 70.
37. Jane M. Gaines, p. 107.
38. Jane M. Gaines, p. 108. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. I, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986). See especially pp. 406-412.
39. Vivian Sobchack, p. 37.
40. See Roland Barthes, "On CinemaScope," trans. by Jonathon Rosenbaum. Barthes writes that "the balcony of History is ready. What remains to be seen is what we'll be shown there."
41. Vivian Sobchack, p. 38.
42. Rob Wilson, p. 71.
43. Arthur J. Pomeroy, "The Vision of a Fascist Rome in *Gladiator*," in Winkler, ed. *Gladiator: Film and History* (Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 111-123.
44. Gilles Deleuze, p. 148.

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