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Gladiator at the Millennium

Set in the Roman Empire of 180 C.E., *Gladiator* adapted a Roman historical setting to express the dreams of its prospective American audience in the year 2000. What was the film's cultural or political ideology, and why did it resonate so with American audiences?

In films as disparate as *Roman Scandals* (1933) and *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), Rome typically stands as a mirror to American foibles, fears, and aspirations. We are so used to the analogy that we do not blink when Roman history shifts cataclysmically to accommodate our metaphor. So for instance, *Gladiator* has noble democrats in the senate and army ally with an imperial daughter to restore the republic - defying history to fulfill democratic wishes dearly held by viewers. This paper explores the ways that *Gladiator* satisfied these and other longings of the US electorate, during the 2000 presidential campaign, for a decent leader uncorrupted by politics, a Cincinnatus ambitious only for his home, wife, and son. The paper also notes other elements that appealed to a late-twentieth-century audience: a reluctant hero who sympathizes with enemies fighting to preserve their homeland and ancestral ways of living; a wise old emperor, weary of imperialist wars and eager for peace and justice; a villain desperate for adulation, twisted by unrequited love for his father; the chastisement of a society addicted to ritual violence as entertainment; and for those who will not live to see the new purer age, at least the promise of blessed union with loved ones after death, in a distinctively Christian heaven.

Finally, this paper shows how *Gladiator*, while clearly attuned to the mood of the year 2000, is also deeply rooted in the tradition of films set in Roman antiquity. Even as it borrows the plot from the 1964 *Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Gladiator* especially invites comparison with its greatest American predecessor in the genre of Roman film: in its characters (such as the Draba-like African slave and the heroine loved by both hero and villain), in its expression of hope that good lies waiting to be tapped in many men and at least one woman, in its ultimate relegation of the heroine to a restricted maternal role (as Lucilla betrays Maximus and the revolution to protect her son), in the martyrdom of the hero, and in the portrayal of untraditional sexuality (homosexuality in the 1963 *Spartacus* and incest in *Gladiator*) as a marker of evil. *Gladiator*'s appropriation of *Spartacus* motifs sprays a cutting-edge Spartacan patina over its mainstream ideology, which expressed the longings of Middle America in the year 2000.