

A quick survey of several reviews of Steve Carter's 1973 film *The Arena* reveals a real uncertainty about how to read the film. Is it a straight-out exploitation film of the women-in-prison genre, or can it be understood as a campy commentary on such movies? My paper will argue that, although it certainly cannot be considered feminist, as some reviewers have argued, *The Arena* does contain enough metatheatrical self-awareness to justify a claim to an undercurrent of subversion. This subversive element is crucial in the structure of the plot. The narrative builds towards the conspiracy of the gladiatrices to escape, and their potential for insurrection is reinforced throughout the film in its dialogue.

The storyline of *The Arena* presents the introduction of women to gladiatorial combat as a marketing gimmick, something to titillate the jaded spectators; a premise which is probably not far from the historical truth. The power of girl-on-girl violence to excite the crowd, however, goes beyond the appeal of an exotic *venatio* or other Colosseum novelties. The source of this thrill is a role-reversal of a very deep-seated nature. When women fight, our understanding of the female as supportive, cooperative and nurturing is stripped away, leaving a battleground which is unfamiliar to combatants and spectators alike. Added to this inversion is the attraction of two other elements, both with strong appeal to much of the male audience: latent lesbianism and the male spectator's fantasy that the women are fighting over him. This second factor is played out more fully in the animé sub-genre of the harem comedy and elsewhere.

Women in *The Arena* straddle the lines between captivity and freedom, sexual object and sexual aggressor and civilization and barbarity without making a decisive move to one side or the other. They are clearly showcased, both by other characters and by the director, as objects for male gratification, but their relations with the other gladiators and with one another demonstrate that they have a more subversive potential. Warrior women can be a male fantasy, but they are one which may fight back.