



# *Gladiator* Overview: Three Sides of the Spectacle in a Heroic Epic Film

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**How to cite this paper:** Chen, Z.F. (2022) *Gladiator* Overview: Three Sides of the Spectacle in a Heroic Epic Film. *Open Access Library Journal*, 9: e9246.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1109246>

**Received:** August 22, 2022

**Accepted:** September 17, 2022

**Published:** September 20, 2022

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## Abstract

Released in 2000, *Gladiator*, a deeply moving epic film, bagged five nominations for the 73<sup>rd</sup> Academy Awards and won the Best Picture Award that year, marking a milestone in the career of director Ridley Scott. Through his inventive use of spectacle, Ridley Scott exemplifies the possibility of imbuing spectacle with multiple levels of meaning and provides his own commentary on the moral and political value of spectacle. This paper attempts a superficial analysis of the two types of the spectacle presented in the film's visual expression and introduces the film's true spectacle from the outside in.

## Subject Areas

Art

## Keywords

*Gladiator*, Spectacle, Engulfment, Epic Film, Narrative

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## 1. Introduction

The story of *Gladiator* is set during the transition from autocracy to republicanism in the ancient Roman government. Aurelius intended for Maximus to succeed to the throne in order to realize the republican ideal and govern Rome with his prestige. Commodus, upon learning of this decision, brutally murdered his father. The murderer of his father was naturally more ruthless in persecuting the former minister of merit, Maximus, and destroying his cherished family. Maximus, having evaded death, was compelled to become a gladiator and perform a death-defying gladiatorial contest for the bloodthirsty populace. But he never gives up his quest for vengeance, as he is aware that "he who wins the hearts of the people will win the world", and that he can only defeat the new emperor with

the support of the populace. Maximus ultimately advances through the various levels of competition and arrives in Rome to engage in a life-or-death duel with Commodus.

Unusual is Ridley Scott's handling of spectacle in this film. As an epic action masterpiece, the film is filled with thrilling fight sequences, impressive visual effects, and a multitude of unforgettable highlights. However, this film's use of spectacle also displays a tendency toward self-reflection. As Maximus shouted to the audience in the arena after a fight that killed all his opponents, "Are you not entertained? Are you not entertained? Is this not why you are here?"

After hearing such deafening lines, the audience cannot help but start thinking, are we not also obsessed with the spectacle? Have we not fallen into the mob, for the bloody violence of the exciting fight scene, spectacular and realistic visual effects brought about by the sensory stimulation and cheer? Are we also pleased to be enslaved by Hollywood blockbusters?

In this regard, I believe that the audience desires to enjoy the film's spectacle but does not enjoy the spectacle itself. In fact, people feel a bit bored when viewing the most exciting scenes of the spectacle. Why have movie spectacle scenes become so unspectacular? What kind of experience do people truly desire from the cinematic spectacle? Through the inventive use of spectacle in the film, Ridley Scott responded to these questions.

In this paper, the presentation of spectacle through *Gladiator* is broken down from the surface to the inside in three layers, starting with a description of the spectacle embodied in the narrative, followed by an elaboration of the film as a constant and highly symbolic spectacle of the crowd, and finally an analysis of the most splendid part of the film—its spirit of self-criticism of the spectacle.

## 2. Spectacle and Narrative

We must first define the concept of spectacle and what purpose it has within a film's story. The initial understanding of "spectacle" in the sense of film theory was coined by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who argued that in classic Hollywood films, the "action" provided by the male characters drives the narrative, whereas the "erotic gaze" provided by the female characters does not bring any narrative momentum to the film, but exists only as a "spectacle". The "erotic gaze" provided by the female character provides no narrative impetus to the film, but exists only as a "spectacle", and "cinema provides an effective form for women to be viewed as cinematic spectacles" [1]. Based on this, British sociologist Scott Lash expanded the definition of cinematic spectacle to include "all images with obvious instinctive impact" [2], and Chinese scholar Zhou Xian summed up the concept of spectacle as follows: extraordinary images and images with a strong visual appeal, or fantasy images and images created using various high-tech cinematic techniques [3]. Consequently, spectacle generally refers to moments or scenes that can amaze the audience. It typically appears in these brief, unresolved moments in the narrative. In other words, when a spectacle

scene occurs in a film, the narrative is suspended and the audience simply observes the exciting movement of the characters or events.

In recent years, with the rapid development of visual effects technology, the distinction between spectacle and narrative has become increasingly obvious. Take the 1993 film *Jurassic Park* as an example; when the dinosaurs reappear, the narrative slows and transforms into a spectacle scene, a scene that not only demonstrates the visual effects technology of the time but also makes narrative sense. As more and more visual effects blockbusters are released, many spectacle scenes provide only fleeting enjoyment before the narrative continues. In some extreme cases, spectacle and narrative are completely separated; director Michael Bay has been criticized for numerous films in which the design of spectacle scenes disregards narrative considerations. In his films, he maximizes the information and visual impact of each frame, regardless of the story's requirements. This narrative disconnection and lack of story-level significance render these spectacle scenes meaningless and tedious.

*Gladiator's* approach to spectacle circumvents this separation quite well, particularly in the war spectacle that drives the story. Let's explore Ridley Scott's depiction of the Roman victory in Germania by returning to the opening sequence. The action is quite unsettling, with a montage of fast cuts and moments of lowered frame rates that make it impossible to visually comprehend what is occurring. Thomas Elsaesser calls this technique "Engulfment", instead of the bounded image, the mode of "Engulfment" works with the ambient image in which it is sound that now "locates", "cues", and even "narrates" the image, producing a more corporeal set of perceptions; instead of voyeurism and fetishistic fixation, there is spatial disorientation; instead of the logic of the "scene", it is semantic clusters, mental maps, spatial metaphors that organize comprehension and narrative transformation.

According to Mulvey, the visual pleasure of cinema consists of voyeurism and narcissism, with the former obtaining pleasure by watching others and the latter achieving self-construction through viewing. "Engulfment" corresponds to spectatorship, which uses voyeurism and viewer identity to achieve the purpose of the image, and "Engulfment" suggests that the image has a non-viewing, body-based variability, and this may modify the viewer's thematic position. The concept of "Engulfment" explains how this chaotic battle scene communicates with the viewer in a non-visual way when the image is blurred and the viewer is left to focus on the music and sound effects. Although this style of capturing the action can easily confuse the audience, if used properly, it can drag the audience directly into the center of the storm to feel the full range of chaos and stimulate the audience's intuitive response, which will be more impressive than just using the ascending frame to create the image. More importantly, the spectacle of the battle scenes serves the narrative, so that the heroic image of Maximus, a general who combines honor and virtue and is loved by his soldiers, is quickly established in the opening scene. The technique makes his battle scenes even more

visceral, allowing the audience to approach the character on an intuitive level.

### 3. Spectacle of Crowd: Struggling for Power

Maximus recognizes the significance of the spectacle of the gladiatorial arena during the opening battle of his training to become a gladiator when the film's main narrative section begins. At this point, the main plot becomes clear; it is a tale of personal vengeance and the redemption of political ideals. Maximus attempts to exact vengeance on Commodus and restore democracy to Rome, while Commodus seeks absolute dominance. In this game, both players must win the hearts and minds of the people in order to achieve their objectives, so the film is filled with spectacle scenes depicting large crowds of people (**Figure 1**).

Maximus makes his debut as a gladiator in the arena in the Roman province of Zucchabar, and, like the Germanic war that opens the film, the emotional expression of this gladiatorial performance is highly effective and strikes the audience right in the heart. At the conclusion of a fight, however, Ridley Scott uses a shot of Maximus, which indicates that Maximus is looking around the arena crowd, but also that the crowd is focused on Maximus and applauding him for a great performance. Maximus realizes the power and spectacle of the crowd from this point forward, while the audience outside the frame is also awestruck (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 1.** Spectacle scenes depicting large crowds of people.



**Figure 2.** Maximus realizes the power and spectacle of the crowd.

The scene transitions to the grand spectacle of Commodus' entry into Rome, one of the few scenes in the film created solely through the use of visual effects to demonstrate the power of crowds and spectacle on the one hand, and to keep the focus on the characters on the other. This parallels the famous Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, in which visual spectacle is linked to Commodus' dictatorship (Figure 3). Despite being an incompetent leader, Commodus understood the nature of the Roman people. Regarding Commodus' initiative to hold 150 days of athletic events, Senator Gracchus commented, "He understood the nature of Rome, which was a mob," and that Commodus had long been aware of the power of crowds, and he wanted people to be ignorant of the real problems and used the people's blind obedience to spectacle to achieve his own ambition—the pursuit of tyrannical rule—"He'll bring them death - and they will love him for it."

Ironically, Maximus is only able to defeat Commodus by utilizing the crowd's spectacle and the power it provides. When Maximus finally enters the arena in Rome, the first battle will be riveting because it is an integral part of the conflict's development. At this point, the spectacle is the center of darkness for Maximus, the "chariot" that conquers the crowd for Commodus, and the signal that the two sides are about to clash for the audience. Ultimately, under the leadership of Maximus, the gladiators fought together with a targeted counterattack and an unprecedented level of camaraderie in competition. Maximus not only won the fight but also kept his promise to show the audience something they had never seen before. Maximus awakened the crowd from its oblivious spectacle consumption (Figure 4).

It is clear that Ridley Scott is attempting to remind the audience that spectacle is not merely a harmless form of entertainment, but can also be used as a weapon to seduce the mind, dull the masses, and establish power over them. The argument of the film is that Rome is self-destructing because the Roman people are hypnotized by the spectacle of the Colosseum, which creates the conditions for the rise of tyranny. And in order to provide hope for democracy, freedom, happiness, and the continuation of Rome's greatness, the social environment that has been left under the control of spectacle must be overthrown, and the



Figure 3. *Gladiator* and *triumph of the will's* spectacle scene comparison.





**Figure 4.** The crowd cheering for the spectacle in the Colosseum in Rome.

film reflects this process accurately. If one dares to attribute a “moral” dimension to the film on a historical/social/political level, the moral lesson is that democracy and freedom are only possible when individuals first liberate themselves from the allure of the spectacle.

#### 4. The Ultimate Spectacle: The Movie Itself

According to Chinese scholar Xu Xiaodong’s book *The Awakening of the Beast in the Mirror—On Film “Spectacle”* [4], “the greatest ‘spectacle’ that film promises audiences is not so much on the audiovisual level as on the narrative level” [5]. Using audiovisual visual spectacle is only one level of cinematic spectacle; the greatest spectacle in the film is the story. *Gladiator* attempts to elevate the audience’s appreciation of spectacle to a higher level. If we say that our fascination with the films of the 1990s, exemplified by *Jurassic Park* is largely influenced by the audience’s desire for technical displays in movies, we would be correct. Then, *Gladiator*, a work born in the new millennium when visual effects were maturing, demonstrates a sense of calmness. The spectacle is no longer a showcase in *Gladiator*. Rather, exhibitionism does not exist in *Gladiator*; spectacle and its special effects are intricately woven into the film’s other scenes and narrative.

If the aforementioned *Triumph of the Will* offers nothing more than the repetitive allure of spectacle in the form of splendid brainwashing that tempts people to submit to the All-Powerful Führer, *Gladiator* offers the exact opposite spectacle strategy. *Gladiator* deliberately associates spectacle scenes with totalitarianism (a connection that can be read explicitly in the film); consequently, *Gladiator* also unconsciously demonstrates to the audience the possibility of overcoming the overwhelming temptation of Hollywood spectacle. Although the film must engage the audience with its own spectacle before it can offer a solution to the “problem” of spectacles, it does present a revolutionary spectacle and provides a vantage point from which the audience can critique spectacles. This qualifies the film to reflect; it questions its own presentation strategy. As an action-adventure film, Leslie Felperin has pointed out, the film does offer ample “dollops of exquisitely choreographed violence”, but it is also “nonetheless im-

PLICITLY critical” of these spectacular displays [6].

## 5. Conclusions

It is well known that presenting the spectacle is one of the natural tasks of cinema art, and this paper takes the famous film *Gladiator* as an entry point to try to add a new horizon to the theory of the spectacle film. In the era of visual culture in which we live, cinema is undergoing a profound shift from narrative cinema to spectacle cinema, and both Hollywood and Chinese films are showing this shift, so this is certainly a topic worth mentioning from time to time.

*Gladiator* does not go so far as to offer a harsh critique of spectacle; rather, it adopts a reflective and inquisitive stance. This is the film’s greatest strength: it seduces us with spectacle but also challenges us to recognize that spectacle is always tied to narrative or history; we should appreciate it and consider it within the context of a larger discourse. Ultimately, the purpose of cinema is not to tell stories but to demonstrate its unique characteristics and expressive capacity. At the same time, Ridley Scott is determined to remind the audience that spectacle possesses tremendous energy and should therefore be used with a sense of responsibility and morality to highlight those who are truly deserving of respect from humanity.

## Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the Hangzhou Normal University Digital Cultural and Creative Industry Integration between Industry and Education Project from the list of Zhejiang Province 2019-2020 Provincial Integration between Industry and Education Project.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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