

The Cinematic State of Gladiators After *Gladiator*

Gladiator achieved financial and critical success from its initial theatrical release in May, 2000 to the following year when it won the MPAAS' heralded Best Picture Award, four additional Oscars, and seven more nominations, not to mention several dozen awards from other organizations. Online box-office surveys report that the film grossed \$457 million during its theatrical release (<http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0172495/>; <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=gladiator.htm>). And this trend-setting film then secured the green light for a number of high-profile, costly Ancients: *Troy* (2004), *Alexander* (2004), and *300* (2006) as well as such films as *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Centurion* (2010), *The Eagle* (2011), *Immortals* (2011), and *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), not to mention the hit premium television series *Rome* (2005-7). This paper will discuss the impact of *Gladiator*, particularly its influence on subsequent films that were not set in antiquity. For more than a decade since 2000, over two dozen films and television programs and advertising campaigns have imitated, quoted, parodied, or contained an homage to *Gladiator*.

While this may seem to be a natural process of popular culture, nonetheless, a brief survey of gladiator films before 2000 will show that the genre that was so successful in Europe and the United States during the sword-and-sandal craze of the 1960s was relegated almost entirely to B-film status and then used as background filler in such 1990s American feature films as *Love Potion No. 9* (1991) with Sandra Bullock, *Chasers* (1994) with Tom Berenger, and *Bulworth* (1998) with Warren Beatty. Even the word "gladiator" was relegated to the initial low-brow joke about the cannibal that was "glad he ate her" 1978, Michael Cimino's Oscar-winning *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday* (1999) may compare modern football

players to “gladiators of our time,” but the background film segment that inspires this poignant line derives—inappropriately—from the chariot race sequence in *Ben-Hur* (1959).

The status of gladiator allusions and modern reenactments changed almost immediately after the release of *Gladiator*. Already in Werner Herzog’s *Invincible* (2001) does its featured strong man dress as a gladiator in an extended scene. Similarly, Dana Carvey dresses and announces himself as Gluteus Maximus in *The Master of Disguise* (2002) and adds, “Are you not entertained?” The same year saw the release of *Gladiator* (2002), a comedy short featuring a General Maxipadimus. In 2004-2005 seven more films were generated in addition to the three-minute Pepsi commercial that premiered during the 2004 SuperBowl and combined the talents of Britney Spears, Beyonce, and Pink in a gladiatorial arena. *Gladiator* allusions were hastily written into films starring such contemporary film stars as Will Ferrell in *Anchorman*, *The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004), Will Smith in *Shark Tale* (2004), and Mickey Rourke and Clive Owen in *Sin City* (2005).

Another round of such films appeared in 2006-7, including *Larry Cable Guy: Health Inspector* (2006), in which the overweight bumpkin dons a gladiator outfit and says with self-irony, “Look too much like Russell Crowe, don’t I?” Similarly, echoes of *Gladiator* fill the Roman military scenes in Ben Stiller’s *Night in the Museum* (2006), while in *Live!* (2007), a satire about reality television, producer Eva Mendes compares her outrageous Russian roulette television-program concept (in which some contestants die) to the Roman Colosseum and gladiators. These were followed by an additional thirteen films produced between 2008 and 2010, including several more widely advertised releases. Most notable are *Pineapple Express* (2008) and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010). In the former, during the middle of a comic but violent fight, Danny McBride says, “What we do in this life echoes in eternity.” The latter,

another Oliver Stone film, contains a number of classical allusions, including a Goya-esque version of “Saturn Devouring His Son,” in addition to another specific reference to Russell Crowe in his role as Maximus in *Gladiator*. The expository titles that open Paul W. S. Anderson’s *Death Race* (2008) describe “new gladiators” and “the mob of ancient Rome.” Somewhat similar is the combat scene in *Doomsday* (2008), which was directed by Neil Marshall, whose next project was a film actually set in antiquity, the aforementioned *Centurion* (2010). Other titles that include specific allusions to or gladiatorial echoes of *Gladiator* are *Gladiator* (2000), *Gladiator II* (2003), *Gladiator: Sword and Sand* (2004), *Two Brothers* (2004), *Bigger Than the Sky* (2005), *Bedtime Stories* (2008), *Stan Helsing* (2009), *Chéri* (2009), *Law Abiding Citizen* (2009), and *Tron: Legacy* (2010).

Nonetheless, the most successful of the gladiatorial recreations by far has been *Spartacus: War of the Damned* [*Blood and Sand*], which premiered on STARZ in 2010 and recently finished its third season. Although the name of the series and those of the continuing protagonists depend on the Spartacus tradition, the *mise-en-scène* and persistent emphases on gladiatorial combat clearly depend on the *Gladiator* tradition well established in the films outlined above in this abstract.