

Essay on unleashing hell for your viewing pleasure

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Ancient Rome and bloodsports

Rome in the heyday of its empire was a rather brash and violent place although it was also civilized up to a point. One of the most popular sports to which thousands used to flock week in, week out was the gladiatorial duel although one also has to contextualize this within the ambit of the games which were usually held over long periods.

The ' games' were nothing short of terrible bloodsports which included fighting to the death in the arena, summary executions and other rather terrible events. The Romans were accustomed to such violence as it was their own form of entertainment although one has to admit that most of the people in that day and age were pretty barbaric and uncivilised themselves.

Comparisons with films

Gladiatorial games have featured in many a film and the ones that spring to mind are Spartacus (1960) and Quo Vadis (1950) although the latter was more concentrated on the killing of Christians in the arena. Spartacus is an interesting film featuring several notable scenes although one has to argue that various parts of the plot are far from the truth.

The gladiatorial scene is rather fantastically described in some cases where one would be wont to think that it was some sort of enviable occupation with the dormitories and camaraderie between men. Still, there must have been some sort of attraction to the sport up to a point and there have been findings which demonstrate that some gladiators were feted as heroes with the best ones even eventually winning their freedom.

Spartacus was quite a gladiator it seems and he was probably one of the best of his time and he also had quite a sound and astute mind. The film treats him with a sort of reverential respect even when he fights in the arena but yet again historical inaccuracies persist.

In fact gladiators actually did not fight so often in the arena and most of the fights were not to the death as some might imagine. Actually around two to five bouts per year took place and these usually lasted for no more than 20 minutes each time enabling the gladiator to ward off any dangerous moves. The bouts were more of an entertainment show than to put people to death although that did happen in the arena, especially during the reign of Nero. Actually most of the gladiators by that time were paid volunteers who saw the sport as some sort of escapism from their own harsh lives. It also afforded them a certain sense of security from all the mayhem around them.

Film directors have tended to view the arena with some sort of skepticism. Kubrick's 'Spartacus' is rather bare and intrinsically pretty barbaric but what one sees is not always the truth. Indeed sometimes, the director tends to portray an inevitability of hatred and protest against the Roman regime especially when the gladiator who should have killed Spartacus hurls a spear at Crassus and attacks the overlord but ends up having his head cut off. The gruesome reality of this scene is one of the most effective in the film, at least to my mind.

William Wyler's 'Quo Vadis' is perhaps more stylistically ambivalent and he manages to portray a certain saintliness in the arena as the Christians meet their death. Mass crucifixions and burnings were rare during games but

there is evidence that several people were killed by being thrown to the lions or in some sort of barbaric spectacle. However directors have steered clear of portraying such wanton violence although they have treated the subject of gladiatorial contests with clarity on more than one occasion.

In Ridley Scott's 'Gladiator', the scenes in the arena are pretty barbaric and quite realistic although again one has to argue that some incidents are quite fantastic. Gladiators were rarely made to fight with animals although there have been some recorded cases and in several incidents the violence is pretty much overstated. Still, this makes for very effective viewing and this is probably one of the most accurate portrayals of what actually went on during some of the games.

The more recent television series depicting Spartacus and which was filmed during 2004 is also quite barbaric although again the gladiatorial scenes are rather overstated and at some points quite stage managed. This demonstrates that directors often prefer to put their own stamp on films rather than go to the historical record to check that all is accurate. They tend to over dramatize situations which will obviously relate to the sensitive viewer who is consistently placed at the centre of things. The combination of Scott, Wyler and Kubrick demonstrates that violence is very effective although how much this actually happened in the arena and on what level remains debatable.

Conclusion – the film as a means to an end

Personal opinions and views remain important in any film but obviously some element of fact is obviously crucial if we are to assess a film or a TV series'

credibility in a wider context. To my mind, the most effective and realistic of gladiatorial portrayals remains the 1960 film, *Spartacus* although *Gladiator* also runs it close. One also has to keep in mind that games differed from province to province in the Roman Empire and the level of brutality was also varied and not always consistent.

However artistic license in films is always an important issue and one has to grant this to the director if he/she wants to attract a credible and interested audience. Historical records on Roman customs and especially games are a bit sketchy anyhow so the descriptive scenes have to include a certain amount of imagination.

The Roman games remain a bone of contention for many and we are still coming to terms with what they really meant for Roman society. Today we sometimes view the whole process as barbaric and cruel but we tend to detach ourselves from what was the real situation in those days. Films like Ridley Scott's 'Gladiator' and Stanley Kubrick's 'Spartacus' bring us closer to what was the world in those days in several different ways.

References

Strauss B (2010); *The Spartacus War*; Simon and Schuster