Ridley Scott's *Gladiator:* Foucauldian Power Dynamics, the Clash of Discourses, and the Unattainability of a Dream

Azra GHANDEHARION
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Abstract: *Drawing upon the Foucauldian paradigms of power, gaze, discourse, and identity delineated in* Discipline and Punish *(Foucault 1975), this article analyzes* Gladiator *(Dir. Scott 2000). It probes the interplay of dominion and dialectics within the Roman Empire's narrative framework, alongside an examination of the protagonist's identity as a reflection of the prevailing power dynamics. This aim is achieved through the dissection of cinematographic elements such as gaze, spatiality, and mise-en-scène. In addition to traditional Foucauldian perspectives, the study integrates insights from Maniglier and Zabunyan (2018), Cárdenas (2017), Hamenstädt (2019), and Gibson (2021), offering a contemporary lens for examining Scott's portrayal of complex power structures. The innovation of this research lies in analyzing Scott's portrayal of a historically nebulous epoch, which deftly unveils the contention of Imperial and Republican discourses, whilst simultaneously muting the more sordid aspects of Rome's colonial exploits. The denouement posits the film not merely as a tale of vengeance but as an allegorical chronicle of contemporary American society. Maximus emerges as the standard-bearer for the Roman/American dream's resurgence, yet the film's tragic resolution signifies the elusive nature of this ideal; a unified Rome materializes only when it is bereft of its great heroes.*

Keywords: *discourse; gaze; identity; power; Scott's* Gladiator *(2000);*

1. Introduction

Ridley Scott (1937–), celebrated for his exploration of power and societal dynamics, captures these themes in *Gladiator* (2000), a film that merges historical drama with a critique of authority. *Gladiator* (2000) captivates audiences with a layered depiction of Ancient Rome through the journey of Maximus Decimus Meridius, a Roman general-turned-gladiator. The film retains its appeal across a diverse audience spectrum after two decades, as evidenced by its enduring acclaim: IMDb (8.5/10), Rotten Tomatoes (79%), Metacritic (67%), Filmaffinity (7.9/10), and Google users (90%). While its central narrative follows Maximus' quest for vengeance, *Gladiator* transcends this personal story, weaving a historical tapestry rich with themes of power, identity, the interplay of light and darkness, the tension between expression and silence, and the desire for a unified vision of Rome. These thematic layers contribute to its resonance as both an epic and a reflection on societal structures and individual agency.

Despite *Gladiator*'s commercial success, academic engagement with the film is limited. Existing scholarship generally falls into three primary categories. The first category examines *Gladiator* through the lens of American culture and hegemony, exploring parallels between the film's representation of Roman imperialism and contemporary American society (Wilson 62-64; Larson 15; Dalby 439-443; Schlimm 131). These analyses highlight Scott's depiction of Rome as a metaphor for the United States, though they sometimes overgeneralize, attributing simplified ideas of "neo-imperialism" to the film. The second category delves into psychological, theological, and philosophical themes, particularly focusing on character motivations and ethical dilemmas (Larson 13; Leer; Trif 75). The third category treats *Gladiator* as a modern epic, addressing its narrative structure and visual appeal (Kassab 27; Albu 189). In contrast, this paper investigates *Gladiator* as a critical exploration of Roman political ideals and American values, focusing on Foucauldian power structures, identity, and surveillance.

The theoretical framework of this analysis is grounded in Michel Foucault's concepts of power relations, surveillance, gaze, and identity formation, as detailed in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Power relations in *Gladiator* demonstrate how control and resistance are established within Roman society, particularly through hierarchical relationships, as seen in Maximus' evolving interactions with Commodus. Surveillance and gaze are explored in gladiatorial arena scenes, where public spectacles function as tools for reinforcing social hierarchies and discipline, resonating with Foucault's concept of panopticism. Identity formation is examined through Maximus' journey from general to slave to gladiator, illustrating how shifts in power reshape personal and collective identities within an imperial context.

Expanding upon Foucault's foundational ideas, contemporary perspectives by Maniglier and Zabunyan in *Foucault at the Movies* (2018) reveal how cinematic techniques can visualize power structures and control, while Hamenstädt (2019) and Gibson (2021) examine how films construct and historicize narratives of authority, discipline, and identity. Maniglier and Zabunyan highlight the use of mise-en-scène, spatial dynamics, and lighting to depict hierarchies and resistance (22–26). Finally, Cárdenas (2017) explores cinema as a Foucauldian dispositif, focusing on how films generate discursive spaces where power relations are both depicted and contested. Together, these perspectives enrich the analysis of *Gladiator*, connecting its cinematic choices to Foucauldian critiques of authority.

Methodologically, this paper employs visual semiotics and narrative analysis as tools for applying Foucault's theories to *Gladiator*. Visual semiotics decodes the film's symbolic language—its spatial compositions, lighting, and camera angles—to reveal how these elements construct and challenge power dynamics. Narrative analysis examines character arcs,

dialogues, and plot structures to uncover the film's engagement with themes of identity and control.

This analysis begins by establishing the theoretical framework, combining Foucault's foundational ideas with insights from Maniglier, Zabunyan, Cárdenas, Hamenstädt, and Gibson. It then examines narrative strategies, focusing on the clash of discourses between Imperial and Republican Rome. Finally, it explores Scott's cinematographic techniques, analyzing how visual and spatial elements reinforce or subvert dominant power structures. The conclusion positions *Gladiator* as a reflection on the complexities of power and identity, offering both a critique of historical imperialism and an allegorical commentary on contemporary socio-political systems.

2. Foucault in Film: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) conceptualizes power in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) as a pervasive force that shapes behaviors, identities, and relationships within structured hierarchies. In *Gladiator*, these concepts manifest through the Roman Empire's hierarchical structures, where Maximus Decimus Meridius' transformation from general to slave to gladiator illustrates how power reshapes personal and collective identities. The film's portrayal of the Colosseum as a site of spectacle and control resonates with Foucault's notion of panopticism, where visibility functions as a mechanism for discipline. Scott's cinematic techniques further illuminate the mechanisms of control embedded in this hierarchical system, bringing Foucauldian ideas into visual and narrative expression.

The concept of dispositif, introduced by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), is a key theoretical tool utilized by contemporary scholars such as Cárdenas, Maniglier, and Zabunyan to analyze cinema. A dispositif refers to complex systems that regulate behaviors and reinforce power through spatial arrangements, institutions, and social practices. In *Foucault at the Movies* (2018), Maniglier and Zabunyan extend these concepts to cinema, positing that films act as dispositifs—sophisticated apparatuses that both reflect and construct systems of power, discipline, and surveillance. Through visual and narrative strategies, films materialize abstract ideas, making them accessible and tangible for audiences. In *Gladiator*, Scott employs mise-en-scène, camera angles, and spatial compositions to illustrate these dynamics. For example, Commodus is often framed in confined, elevated spaces that emphasize his authority, while Maximus is depicted in open, dynamic environments, underscoring his resistance. Maniglier and Zabunyan's framework enables a nuanced analysis of how *Gladiator's* cinematic techniques visualize the interplay between dominance and defiance, situating the film as a critical interrogation of hierarchical power structures.

Juan David Cárdenas (2017) contributes further to this discussion by emphasizing the role of cinema as a dispositif that not only represents but also produces power relations. Cárdenas underscores the dual nature of cinema as a medium that regulates both the content displayed and the ways audiences perceive it. This is evident in *Gladiator*, where Scott's cinematic techniques—such as the use of rack focusing, extreme close-ups, and long shots—engage with the politics of visibility and control. For example, the Colosseum's hierarchical layout—where gladiators are confined to shadowy, oppressive spaces while citizens occupy illuminated, elevated tiers—becomes a microcosm of Roman social stratification, visually encoding systems of power and discipline.

Ulrich Hamenstädt (2019) further enhances this discussion by examining how films serve as mediums for political theorization. Hamenstädt's edited collection, *The Interplay Between Political Theory and Movies: Bridging Two Worlds,* argues that cinematic storytelling makes abstract ideological structures tangible, enabling audiences to engage with complex systems of governance and authority. In *Gladiator*, this dynamic is exemplified by the ideological conflict between Imperial Rome's authoritarianism and the Republican ideal of collective governance. Spatial divisions within the Colosseum, particularly the elevation of the emperor above the arena floor, construct a visual metaphor for these ideological tensions. Hamenstädt's insights underline how cinema bridges the gap between theoretical abstraction and visual representation, transforming *Gladiator* into a platform for engaging with Foucauldian critiques of authority.

Andrew Gibson (2021) contributes a complementary perspective by exploring how films construct narratives of historicity and power. Gibson's work highlights the role of temporal and visual strategies in engaging with historical and political consciousness. In *Gladiator*, Scott employs flashbacks and non-linear storytelling to juxtapose Maximus' past life as a general with his current status as a gladiator. This temporal interplay underscores the fluidity of identity within systems of power, resonating with Foucault's assertion that power is deeply intertwined with the production of knowledge and subjectivity. Gibson's insights enrich the analysis of *Gladiator* by situating it within a broader discourse on the construction of historical narratives and the interplay between individual agency and systemic control.

Methodologically, this study utilizes visual semiotics and narrative analysis to apply these theoretical insights to *Gladiator*. Visual semiotics focuses on the symbolic meanings conveyed through cinematic elements, such as lighting, camera angles, spatial arrangements, and mise-en-scène. For instance, high-angle shots depicting Maximus in vulnerable positions contrast with low-angle shots that emphasize his moments of empowerment, visually narrating his ascent through the hierarchies of Roman society. Similarly, the

interplay of light and shadow within the Colosseum reflects the dichotomy between subjugation and spectacle, aligning with Foucault's theories on visibility and control.

Narrative analysis complements this visual approach by examining the plot structure, character arcs, and dialogues to uncover the thematic concerns of power, resistance, and identity. Maximus' transformation from a loyal general to a vengeful gladiator exemplifies how shifts in power dynamics reshape individual identities. This transformation also highlights the film's engagement with broader ideological conflicts, such as the tension between authoritarianism and democracy.

By integrating these methodological tools with the theoretical contributions of Foucault, Maniglier and Zabunyan, Cárdenas, Hamenstädt, and Gibson, this study offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing *Gladiator*. The following sections will apply this framework to specific aspects of the film, focusing on its narrative strategies, visual techniques, and thematic concerns. Through this lens, *Gladiator* emerges not only as a historical epic but also as a critique of modern socio-political ideals, revealing the enduring relevance of Foucauldian concepts in contemporary cinematic analysis.

3. Merging Past and Present: *Gladiator*'s Temporal Ambiguities

The structure of Roman society, as depicted in *Gladiator*, reflects an ambiguous temporal space that merges historical authenticity with creative liberties. Roman society was hierarchically structured into patricians, plebeians, freemen, and slaves, with only the first two groups enjoying full citizenship rights (Parkin and Pomeroy 1–2). This rigid societal stratification provides a thematic backdrop for Ridley Scott's narrative. The film situates its story in a historically nebulous period between the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, marked by a weakening Senate and the consolidation of totalitarian imperial rule (Kelly 130). By exploiting this historical ambiguity, Scott constructs a Rome that resonates with contemporary concerns about governance, power, and identity.

Maniglier and Zabunyan observe that cinema functions as a space where historical moments are reimagined through ideological and visual frameworks, creating anachronistic juxtapositions (51–53). Zimmer's score, creates these juxtapositions, blending epic musical styles with modern cinematic sensibilities to anchor Gladiator in both the past and present (Dreyfus 45-47). Applying this insight, *Gladiator* transforms the transition between Imperial and Republican ideals into a narrative that critiques modern anxieties about leadership and moral authority. The film reinterprets this Roman epoch as a battleground of governance, embedding historical uncertainty within its narrative to address contemporary sociopolitical concerns.

After Marcus Aurelius' death, the film portrays a spectacle-driven model of power aligned with Foucault's concept of disciplinary society (*Discipline and Punish* 28–36). Public executions and gladiatorial games, central to the Roman political apparatus, serve as mechanisms for projecting imperial dominance and discouraging dissent. Foucault's theory of the spectacle illustrates how such performative displays reinforce power hierarchies by embedding control within public visibility (34–35). This concept finds vivid representation in *Gladiator*'s Colosseum sequences, where Commodus consolidates his rule through orchestrated spectacles designed to command loyalty and suppress rebellion.

Gibson emphasizes that cinema produces "historicity" by blending historical facts with ideological constructs, shaping how audiences perceive power and resistance (1565–1567). In *Gladiator*, this interplay is evident in the portrayal of Marcus Aurelius as a philosopher-king advocating for democracy and Commodus as a corrupt usurper. This framing transforms the historical shift from Republic to Empire into a symbolic critique of authoritarian governance, with Maximus serving as the moral counterpoint to Commodus' despotism.

The division of spaces in *Gladiator* further reflects power hierarchies, with Marcus Aurelius often occupying elevated, well-lit environments that symbolize transparency and moral authority, while Commodus is depicted in shadowed, enclosed settings that underscore his manipulative and oppressive tendencies. Cárdenas discusses how spatial hierarchies in cinema function as dispositifs, visually reinforcing the power dynamics embedded within the narrative (71). In *Gladiator*, the mise-en-scène emphasizes these contrasts, creating a visual metaphor for the ideological divide between Aurelius and Commodus.

Maximus' shifting identity—general, slave, gladiator—reveals how societal roles are shaped and constrained by the Roman power structure. Hamenstädt highlights the role of cinema in bridging abstract political theories with tangible representations, enabling audiences to engage with complex sociopolitical dynamics (49–50). In *Gladiator*, this dynamic is illustrated through Maximus' journey, which reflects the ideological conflicts between Republican and Imperial Rome. The character's transformation from a celebrated general to a marginalized gladiator embodies the tension between individual agency and institutional control.

By blending historical and cinematic elements, *Gladiator* creates a Rome that is both familiar and alien, past and present. Its portrayal of Rome as a fractured society resonates with modern audiences, offering a lens through which to examine the interplay of power, identity, and morality. As Maniglier and Zabunyan assert, cinema illuminates the unspoken tensions of history, transforming historical narratives into allegorical critiques of present-day

concerns (76-79). This synthesis of historical ambiguity and ideological critique underpins *Gladiator*'s dual function as both a cinematic spectacle and a sociopolitical commentary.

4. Clashes of Discourses: The Imperial or Republic Rome?

In *Gladiator*, the tension between Imperial and Republican ideals emerges as the central conflict, shaping not only the narrative but also the portrayal of power, morality, and identity. This tension is encapsulated in Marcus Aurelius' vision for a Republic, emphasizing shared governance, contrasted with Commodus' ambitions for absolute authority. The ideological clash is integral to the film's depiction of Rome's sociopolitical structure, highlighting the cyclical struggle between democratic ideals and autocratic rule. As Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, power operates through relational dynamics, molding individuals and societies through mechanisms of control and resistance (27). *Gladiator* visualizes these dynamics through its interplay of narrative and cinematography, where the locus of power gradually shifts from the emperor to the people as Maximus gains influence.

The ideological divide is first revealed in Aurelius' conversation with Maximus. Aurelius articulates his vision for the Republic in a pivotal moment of the film:

> I will have one last **duty** for you; I want you to become the **Protector of Rome** after I die. I will ***empower*** you to one end alone. To give **power** back to the **people** of Rome and end the **corruption** that has crippled it. Would you accept this **great honor** that I have offered you? (*Gladiator* 00:27)

Aurelius' rhetoric is steeped in the ideals of the Republic, emphasizing duty, sacrifice, and collective governance. As Gibson notes, cinematic historicity often reframes historical events to address contemporary anxieties about governance and democracy (1568). Here, Aurelius embodies a nostalgic longing for a democratic ideal, while Commodus represents a more authoritarian vision of centralized power.

Maximus becomes a symbolic battleground for these competing discourses. His journey from general to slave to gladiator reflects the fluidity of identity within power structures, aligning with Foucault's concept of power as a productive force that shapes individuals through societal expectations and constraints (136–137). Cárdenas highlights that cinema, as a dispositif, reconfigures identities and spaces, reflecting the shifting dynamics of power and control (76). In *Gladiator*, this is evident in Maximus' transformation, which is visually represented through spatial dynamics and mise-en-scène. For instance, in the opening battle sequence, Maximus is depicted in commanding

high-angle shots as he leads his troops to victory (00:08). However, after his fall from grace, he is confined to shadowy, enclosed spaces, with low-angle shots emphasizing his subjugation as a slave (00:38).

The visual dichotomy between Aurelius and Commodus further underscores their ideological differences. Maniglier and Zabunyan argue that cinema often uses lighting and spatial contrasts to dramatize ideological conflicts (139). In *Gladiator,* Aurelius is frequently shown in open, well-lit spaces, symbolizing transparency and moral clarity, while Commodus is framed in darker, enclosed environments, reflecting his manipulative and oppressive nature. This visual contrast aligns with the narrative's critique of Commodus' authoritarian rule, which prioritizes spectacle and personal ambition over collective well-being. Commodus' decision to reinstate gladiatorial games, framed as an act of appeasement, also reveals his reliance on spectacle as a tool of control, echoing Foucault's notion of the spectacle as a mechanism of power (34).

The gladiatorial arena becomes a microcosm of these ideological tensions. The Colosseum, with its hierarchical arrangement of spaces, mirrors the stratification of Roman society. As Hamenstädt observes, public spectacles in cinema often materialize abstract power relations, enabling audiences to engage with their ideological underpinnings (52). In *Gladiator*, the spatial arrangement of the spectators, gladiators, and emperor reflects this hierarchy. Commodus occupies the central, elevated box, symbolizing his dominance, while the gladiators are confined to the arena, representing their subjugation. However, Maximus disrupts this power dynamic by winning the crowd's favor, shifting the locus of power from the emperor to the people. This shift is visually emphasized through close-up shots of Maximus juxtaposed with long shots of Commodus, highlighting the erosion of Commodus' authority (01:29).

Maximus' rebellion against the structures of Imperial Rome is both a personal and political act. In the scene where he refuses to show his face to Commodus, Maximus declares, "My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius… father to a murdered son, husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next" (01:38). This declaration, delivered in the Colosseum under the public gaze, transforms Maximus into a symbol of resistance. As Cárdenas notes, cinema can foreground marginalized identities and spaces to critique the systemic violence underpinning power structures (85). In this moment, Maximus becomes a conduit for the people's discontent, challenging both the ideological and spatial boundaries imposed by Imperial Rome.

The narrative also critiques the limitations and contradictions of both Imperial and Republican ideals. While Aurelius' vision for a Republic is idealized, it is also portrayed as unattainable within the corrupt and hierarchical structures of Roman society. *Gladiator* uses violence and spectacle in the

Colosseum as a metaphor for the foundational myths that shape Republican ideals, presenting these ideals as both inspirational and deeply flawed (Thomassen 145–148). Cinema often exposes the inconsistencies and omissions within historical narratives (Maniglier and Zabunyan 153). In *Gladiator*, the portrayal of Aurelius' Republic as a nostalgic ideal reveals the fragility of democratic aspirations within a deeply stratified society. Similarly, Commodus' authoritarian rule, though depicted as corrupt and exploitative, is shown to be a natural extension of the Roman Empire's systemic inequalities.

The film's unresolved tension between these ideologies reflects the cyclical nature of power struggles within societies. As Gibson explains, cinematic representations of history often reflect unresolved tensions, mirroring the complexities and contradictions of historical narratives (1576). In *Gladiator*, these tensions are embodied in the figure of Maximus, whose multifaceted identity challenges the binary opposition of Imperial and Republican ideals.

By juxtaposing these competing discourses, *Gladiator* critiques both the Imperial and Republican visions of Rome while engaging with contemporary concerns about governance and morality. Hamenstädt emphasizes that films can serve as reflective spaces for interrogating modern political systems, drawing parallels between historical and contemporary power structures (54). In this sense, *Gladiator* transcends its historical setting, offering a timeless exploration of power, identity, and resistance.

5. Commodus and Aurelius: The Gaze of Power and the Vision of Rome

The gaze, as conceptualized in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), is not merely a tool of observation but a mechanism of power that disciplines and controls. In *Gladiator*, the interplay of gazes shapes the power dynamics between Commodus, Aurelius, and the Roman populace. The film explores how the gaze operates in public spaces like the Colosseum, where surveillance and spectacle intertwine, and in private spaces, where familial and political tensions manifest through spatial hierarchies and visual contrasts. This Foucauldian framework is enriched by the cinematic techniques employed by Ridley Scott, which dramatize the exercise and resistance of power through visual and narrative elements.

Maniglier and Zabunyan (2018) argue that cinema, as a dispositif, enables the visualization and critique of power structures, transforming abstract concepts like the gaze into tangible cinematic experiences (73). In *Gladiator*, Scott's manipulation of spatial positioning and camera work emphasizes the asymmetric distribution of power. Commodus often occupies elevated positions, symbolizing his perceived dominance, while Aurelius is frequently depicted in egalitarian settings that reflect his moral authority. This

spatial dichotomy is further accentuated by lighting contrasts: Commodus is often shrouded in shadow, underscoring his manipulative nature, while Aurelius is bathed in light, signifying transparency and integrity.

The Colosseum emerges as a central site where the gaze of power is performed and contested. Cárdenas (2017) highlights that such public spaces in cinema serve as dispositifs that regulate visibility and social hierarchies while also providing opportunities for subversion (78). In *Gladiator*, the Colosseum functions as a stage for Commodus to assert his control over the masses through orchestrated spectacles. However, as Maximus gains the favor of the crowd, the public gaze begins to shift, destabilizing Commodus' authority. This inversion of the gaze aligns with Foucault's assertion that power is relational and can be disrupted when its mechanisms are exposed or redirected (*Discipline and Punish* 35).

The private interactions between Commodus and Aurelius further illustrate the dynamics of the gaze. Commodus' yearning for his father's approval reflects his internal struggle to align his self-image with Aurelius' ideals. In one poignant scene, Commodus confesses:

> You wrote to me once, listing the four chief virtues: wisdom, justice, fortitude, and temperance. As I read the list, I knew I had none of them. But I have other virtues, Father: ambition, resourcefulness, courage, and devotion. (00:34-35)

This moment underscores Commodus' reliance on his father's gaze for validation, even as he diverges from the values it represents. Gibson (2021) observes that such cinematic moments highlight the interplay between personal identity and systemic power, illustrating how characters navigate conflicting expectations within hierarchical structures (1572).

Lucilla, another pivotal figure, embodies a gaze that challenges Commodus' dominance. In their exchanges, Lucilla's dynamic movements and commanding presence contrast with Commodus' static, seated position, visually reinforcing her moral and intellectual superiority (01:04). Hamenstädt (2019) notes that cinema often employs spatial and visual contrasts to dramatize power relations, enabling audiences to engage with abstract political dynamics (50). Through Lucilla's interactions with Commodus, Scott critiques the fragility of autocratic rule, where dominance is contingent on the control of others' gazes.

Proximo's commentary on the gaze within the gladiatorial games offers a meta-cinematic reflection on the nature of spectacle and power. He remarks: "When you [gladiator] die and die you shall, your transition shall be to the sound of [applause]" (00:52). This statement encapsulates the transactional nature of the gaze in the arena, where the gladiators' worth is determined by

their ability to entertain and captivate the crowd. Maniglier and Zabunyan (2018) argue that such moments in cinema reveal the dual function of dispositifs: they discipline individuals while also creating spaces for resistance and reinterpretation (78). Maximus exploits this dynamic by transforming the spectacle into a platform for resistance, redirecting the public gaze to challenge Commodus' legitimacy.

Commodus' attempts to monopolize the gaze are ultimately his undoing. His reliance on spectacle to consolidate power mirrors the strategies of modern dictators, whose public displays mask their insecurities and dependence on popular approval. Hamenstädt (2019) emphasizes that cinema's ability to juxtapose historical and contemporary imagery enables it to critique modern systems of governance through historical allegories (54). In *Gladiator*, the parallels between Commodus' spectacles and the propaganda of 20th-century totalitarian regimes invite viewers to reflect on the dangers of conflating visibility with power.

The vision of Rome articulated by Aurelius and Commodus represents another dimension of the gaze. Aurelius envisions a Republic founded on shared governance and moral integrity, while Commodus' vision is rooted in personal ambition and authoritarian control. These conflicting ideologies are encapsulated in Lucilla's response to Commodus' question about the 'greatness of Rome': "It is a vision" (*Gladiator* 01:05–08). Lucilla's ambiguity reflects the film's broader critique of Rome as a colonial and hierarchical power. Cárdenas (2017) observes that cinema often uses such moments to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of historical narratives, exposing their inherent contradictions (84).

By focusing on the gaze, *Gladiator* reveals the fragility of power that relies on visibility and spectacle. Scott's cinematic techniques—spatial contrasts, lighting, and framing—transform the gaze into a dynamic force that both reinforces and challenges hierarchical structures. Through the contributions of Foucault, Maniglier and Zabunyan, Hamenstädt, Gibson, and Cárdenas, this analysis situates *Gladiator* as a critique of the mechanisms through which power is constructed, performed, and contested.

6. Maximus: The Personification of a Unified Rome

Maximus' journey in *Gladiator* is a narrative of transformation, resistance, and the assertion of agency within oppressive power structures. His evolution from a celebrated legatus to a marginalized gladiator highlights the relational nature of power, as theorized by Foucault, who posits that power is not merely repressive but also productive, shaping individual identities and societal structures (27). *Gladiator* draws upon video game-like structures, where Maximus ascends through increasingly challenging "levels" of power and gains influence, reflecting the dynamics of resilience and control within the

Colosseum (Lopes 31–51). In the context of the Roman Empire's hierarchical system, Maximus' shifting roles underscore the interplay between visibility, resistance, and authority.

Proximo's initial briefing encapsulates the commodification of gladiators and the spectacle of violence: "When die and die you shall" (00:52). This statement reflects Foucault's concept of disciplinary mechanisms, where public spectacles serve as tools to reinforce control and hierarchy. Cárdenas identifies such dispositifs in cinema as mechanisms that regulate not only the content displayed but also the audience's perception of power and resistance (85). The Colosseum in *Gladiator* epitomizes this dual function, as it simultaneously disciplines the gladiators and manipulates the crowd's gaze to sustain imperial authority.

Maximus' defiance of these constraints begins to dismantle the imperial narrative. His rhetorical challenge to the audience— "Are you not entertained? Is this not why you're here?" (01:11)—functions as a subversion of the spectacle's intended purpose. By questioning the moral implications of their entertainment, Maximus redirects the gaze of power, destabilizing the Colosseum's dispositif. Maximus' hybrid hero archetype, blending traditional epic heroism with modern sensibilities, which positions him as a symbol of unity and resistance against tyranny (Leer 18). As Hamenstädt observes, cinema often bridges abstract political theories with tangible representations, enabling viewers to engage with systemic critiques (50). In this moment, Maximus not only critiques the spectators but also exposes the exploitative structures underpinning Roman society.

Lucilla's recognition of Maximus' symbolic power further illuminates his transformation into a figure of resistance. The dialogue between Maximus and Lucilla captures this dynamic:

> MAXIMUS. The gods spared me? I am at their [the audience's] mercy, with the power to only amuse a mob.
>
> LUCILLA. That is power, the mob is Rome. While Commodus controls them, he can control everything. […] Today I saw a slave become more powerful than the Emperor of Rome. […] You have a great name; he must kill your name before he kills you. (01:43-53)

This exchange underscores Foucault's assertion that power operates relationally, with resistance emerging as a counterforce within the same structures that sustain authority (136). Lucilla's acknowledgment of the crowd's influence reframes Maximus' role, positioning him as a conduit for collective resistance. Cárdenas highlights how cinema can foreground

marginalized identities and spaces, transforming them into sites of contestation and empowerment (85).

Scott's visual techniques reinforce this power shift. As Maniglier and Zabunyan note, cinema employs spatial hierarchies and lighting contrasts to dramatize power dynamics (76). In *Gladiator*, Maximus' progression from the arena floor to a figure commanding public attention is conveyed through low-angle shots, close-ups, and dynamic lighting. For instance, his initial confinement to shadowy spaces symbolizes his subjugation, while subsequent scenes depict him in illuminated environments, signifying his ascendancy. This visual transformation mirrors his growing agency within the Colosseum's dispositif.

Maximus' rebellion culminates in his confrontation with Commodus, where his declaration— "My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius […] father to a murdered son, husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next" (01:38)—becomes a defining moment of resistance. Delivered under the public gaze, this statement transforms Maximus into a symbol of justice and defiance. As Gibson observes, cinematic storytelling often juxtaposes individual agency with systemic oppression, illustrating the complexities of historical narratives (1575). In this instance, Maximus' assertion of identity challenges both the emperor's authority and the societal norms that perpetuate his oppression.

Proximo's guidance, initially framed within the constraints of the gladiatorial system, ultimately highlights Maximus' departure from the role of mere entertainer. Proximo's remark— "The crowd doesn't want a butcher, they want a hero" (01:09)—reflects the shifting dynamics of audience perception, as Maximus transforms into a figure embodying collective resistance. This aligns with Foucault's concept of power as a productive force, where even subjugated individuals can generate new discourses and identities that challenge existing hierarchies (*Discipline and Punish* 136–137).

Hamenstädt underscores the importance of spatial and symbolic representations in cinema, which materialize abstract political conflicts into tangible narratives (49–50). In *Gladiator*, this is exemplified by the Colosseum's spatial hierarchy, where the emperor occupies elevated positions while the gladiators are confined to the arena floor. Maximus' eventual dominance within this space, achieved through both physical and symbolic acts of resistance, disrupts these power dynamics. His victories not only secure his survival but also galvanize the crowd, shifting the balance of power away from Commodus.

Maximus' transformation is not merely personal but emblematic of broader societal tensions. As Maniglier and Zabunyan argue, cinema has the capacity to illuminate unspoken historical and ideological tensions, transforming them into allegorical critiques of present-day concerns (153). In

Gladiator, Maximus' journey becomes a lens through which to explore themes of agency, resistance, and the fragility of authoritarian power. His final act, sacrificing himself to restore Rome's moral and political order, cements his legacy as the personification of a unified Rome—a figure who embodies both its aspirations and contradictions.

7. Silenced Narratives: Marginalized Voices

Gladiator portrays a rich tapestry of Rome's sociopolitical landscape, yet beneath its visual grandeur lies a narrative of marginalization and omission. The film, while focusing on Maximus' personal journey and the ideological conflict between Imperial and Republican ideals, systematically silences or distorts certain voices to prioritize its central narrative. Power and silence, as articulated in *Discipline and Punish*, emphasize how dominant discourses often marginalize or suppress alternative perspectives to consolidate authority (27–30). Scott's cinematic choices mirror this process, highlighting the mechanisms by which silence becomes an instrument of control within both the film's narrative and its broader socio-historical implications.

Maniglier and Zabunyan argue that cinema functions as a complicated network of knowledge, power, and social practices, creating spaces where ideological structures are both reinforced and contested (76–79). In *Gladiator*, this duality is evident in the portrayal of Rome's colonial exploits and its marginalized subjects. The film's opening battle scene juxtaposes the disciplined Roman army with the chaotic and faceless barbarians, emphasizing the superiority of the Empire's "civilizing" mission. However, this depiction obscures the violent realities of Roman imperialism, relegating the conquered peoples to the periphery of the narrative. Cárdenas highlights that cinema often constructs historical narratives that silence marginalized groups while amplifying dominant ideologies (83–84). The absence of any meaningful representation of the barbarians' perspectives in *Gladiator* exemplifies this dynamic.

The motif of light and darkness in the film's mise-en-scène further underscores the silencing of alternative narratives. Maximus' Spanish origins, for instance, are barely acknowledged, despite their potential to critique Rome's colonial dominance. Hispania, a territory subdued by Roman imperialism, is portrayed in fleeting, idyllic images of Maximus' farm, detached from the historical realities of conquest and subjugation. This selective representation aligns with what Gibson describes as the "constructed historicity" of cinema, where certain aspects of history are foregrounded while others are deliberately muted to serve a particular ideological purpose (1571–1573). *Gladiator* blends historical authenticity with cinematic liberties, allowing it to resonate with contemporary audiences while reimagining Rome's past as a tool for addressing modern political concerns.

Silence also plays a critical role in the depiction of Roman societal hierarchies. The gladiators, many of whom are slaves, prisoners, or members of conquered tribes, are confined to spaces of darkness and degradation. Their voices are rarely heard, and their individuality is subsumed under the spectacle of violence in the Colosseum. Hamenstädt notes that films often use spatial arrangements to visually encode power dynamics, marginalizing certain groups through their placement within the cinematic frame (51). In *Gladiator*, the gladiators' physical confinement mirrors their lack of agency within the narrative, highlighting how spatial hierarchies reinforce systemic oppression.

Lucilla's character provides a nuanced example of how silence is both imposed and resisted. As Commodus' sister, she occupies a precarious position within the imperial hierarchy, navigating the dual pressures of familial loyalty and political survival. Lucilla's silenced voice mirrors broader cinematic patterns of marginalizing female characters in historical narratives, reinforcing their struggles within patriarchal power structures. Her dialogues with Maximus and Commodus reveal the constraints placed upon her voice, as she must carefully balance her personal desires with the demands of imperial politics. When Commodus asserts his authority by invoking the "greatness of Rome," Lucilla counters with a cryptic response: "It is a vision" (01:05–08). This ambiguity reflects her strategic use of silence to resist Commodus' dominance while avoiding direct confrontation. As Maniglier and Zabunyan observe, silence in cinema often functions as a form of resistance, enabling characters to subvert power structures without openly challenging them (139).

Proximo's role further illustrates the interplay between silence and power. His initial briefing to the gladiators— "When you die […], your transition shall be to the sound of …" (00:52)—captures the dehumanizing nature of the spectacle. While Proximo is complicit in the exploitation of gladiators, his later interactions with Maximus suggest a growing recognition of their humanity. Cárdenas emphasizes that cinema's ability to foreground marginalized perspectives lies in its capacity to reconfigure visual and narrative hierarchies (86). Proximo's evolving relationship with Maximus subtly critiques the systemic violence of the Colosseum, even as he operates within its confines.

Despite its omissions, *Gladiator* occasionally gestures toward the silenced voices within its narrative. Maximus' interactions with Juba, a Numidian gladiator, hint at the shared struggles of the oppressed, though Juba's character remains largely underdeveloped. This lack of depth reflects what Gibson identifies as the hierarchization of narratives in historical cinema, where peripheral characters are subordinated to the central protagonist (1574). The film's focus on Maximus' journey overshadows the collective experiences of the marginalized, limiting its critique of systemic oppression.

Scott's selective portrayal of Rome's colonial and imperial legacies raises critical questions about the ideological function of historical cinema**.** By emphasizing the moral and political conflicts within the Roman elite, *Gladiator* downplays the exploitative foundations of the Empire, creating a narrative that is both compelling and problematic. As Hamenstädt observes, films often serve as reflective spaces where historical tensions are negotiated but not necessarily resolved (54). In *Gladiator*, the silencing of marginalized voices underscores the limitations of its critique, revealing the complexities of representing history through the lens of cinema.

The interplay between silence and power in *Gladiator* extends beyond its narrative to its broader sociopolitical implications. Maniglier and Zabunyan highlight how cinema, as a dispositif, shapes not only the stories it tells but also the ways audiences perceive and engage with history (153). By silencing certain voices and amplifying others, *Gladiator* constructs a vision of Rome that reflects contemporary anxieties about governance, identity, and morality. While the film's omissions reveal its ideological biases, they also invite viewers to critically engage with the historical narratives it presents, exposing the silences that underpin both past and present systems of power.

8. A Dream Reborn, Deferred or Lost?

Gladiator transcends its historical setting, functioning as both an epic tale of vengeance and a reflection on the complexities of American socio-political ideals. Through its layered narrative and cinematographic choices, the film grapples with the notion of the American Dream, exploring its potential for unity and freedom while simultaneously critiquing its inherent contradictions. Maximus' journey reflects Adams' definition of American Dream in *The Epic of America*; he encapsulates the pursuit of personal fulfillment and upward mobility. Scott navigates between the duality of intuitional power and personal resistance, emphasizing the tension between what Foucault calls individual agency and systemic control (27–30). While *Gladiator* ostensibly celebrates the triumph of democratic ideals over authoritarian rule, its tragic conclusion suggests a more nuanced interpretation: the American Dream remains an elusive and unattainable ideal, fraught with moral and political ambiguities.

Maniglier and Zabunyan argue that cinema serves as a dispositif, shaping collective perceptions of identity and governance through its visual and narrative constructs (153). In *Gladiator*, this function is evident in the portrayal of Maximus as a quintessential American hero. This transcendentalist dimension of self-reliance and moral integrity is rooted in American Romanticism and Thoreau's philosophy, as articulated in *Walden: Life in the Woods*, where self-discovery and inner virtue underpin human freedom.

His journey from general to slave to gladiator embodies the archetypal narrative of resilience and redemption, aligning with the transcendentalist

ideals of self-reliance and personal integrity. However, the film's emphasis on spectacle and violence complicates this narrative, revealing the darker undercurrents of the American Dream. The Colosseum, with its hierarchical spatial arrangement and ritualized displays of power, mirrors the commodification of success and the perpetuation of systemic inequality in contemporary society. Wilson (2002) connects the Colosseum's spectacles to modern media systems, arguing that they serve as tools for reinforcing collective perceptions of imperial authority, much like contemporary propaganda machines (62–64).

Gibson highlights the role of cinema in constructing "historicity," blending historical facts with ideological constructs to shape viewers' perceptions of power and morality (1573–1575). In *Gladiator*, Scott reimagines the Roman Empire as an allegory for modern America, juxtaposing Marcus Aurelius' vision of a democratic Republic with Commodus' authoritarianism. *Gladiator* reflects contemporary anxieties about American neo-imperialism, using Rome as a metaphor for the tensions between global dominance and democratic ideals in the modern world (Dalby 439–445). This framing reflects contemporary anxieties about leadership and governance, particularly in the context of American imperialism. Maximus, as the moral center of the narrative, becomes a vessel for these competing ideals, embodying both the aspirations and the contradictions of the American Dream.

The film's mise-en-scène reinforces this allegorical reading. Cárdenas observes that cinema often uses visual hierarchies to encode ideological tensions, creating a dynamic interplay between power and resistance (85). In *Gladiator*, the interplay of light and shadow symbolizes the moral ambiguity of the American Dream. Maximus' farm, bathed in golden light, represents the ideal of familial unity and self-sufficiency, while the shadowy confines of the Colosseum underscore the corrupting influence of power and spectacle. These visual contrasts highlight the tension between individual aspirations and systemic constraints, revealing the fragility of the American Dream within the framework of institutionalized violence.

The film's narrative constructs a poignant reflection on American present history, particularly through key moments that emphasize recurring themes like the "vision," "dream" (00:25; 01:05–08), and the dual forces of "fear and wonder" (01:55; 02:42). The repetition of these motifs situates the film's critique of imperial Rome as a metaphor for the contradictions inherent in modern American governance and values.

Hamenstädt emphasizes the role of cinema in bridging abstract political theories with tangible representations, enabling audiences to engage with complex socio-political dynamics (54–56). In *Gladiator*, this dynamic is evident in the portrayal of Rome as a fractured society, divided between competing visions of governance. The film's unresolved tension between

Imperial and Republican ideals reflects broader questions about the sustainability of democratic values in the face of systemic corruption and inequality. By situating these tensions within the context of Maximus' personal journey, Scott critiques the limitations of both individual agency and collective governance, exposing the inherent contradictions of the American Dream.

Lucilla's interactions with Maximus and Commodus further complicate the film's exploration of power and morality. As a character torn between loyalty to her family and her aspirations for a better Rome, Lucilla embodies the sacrifices and compromises inherent in the pursuit of the American Dream. Her cryptic observation—"The mob is Rome" (01:43–53)—underscores the fragility of democratic ideals, suggesting that the will of the people can be both a source of empowerment and a tool of manipulation. Maniglier and Zabunyan argue that silence and ambiguity in cinema often function as forms of resistance, enabling characters to navigate oppressive systems without directly confronting them (139). Lucilla's strategic use of silence highlights the complexities of navigating power dynamics within both the Roman and American socio-political contexts.

Proximo's evolving relationship with Maximus adds another layer to the film's critique of the American Dream. As a former gladiator turned trainer, Proximo represents the disillusionment of those who have navigated the system and survived its exploitative structures. His advice to Maximus—"The crowd doesn't want a butcher; they want a hero" (00:58–01:09)—reflects the commodification of heroism within the spectacle of power. While Proximo initially embodies the cynicism of a system built on exploitation, his eventual support for Maximus' rebellion suggests a recognition of the need for systemic change. Cárdenas highlights that cinema can reconfigure hierarchical relationships, foregrounding marginalized perspectives to challenge dominant ideologies (86). Proximo's arc underscores the potential for resistance within even the most entrenched systems of power.

Despite its emphasis on individual agency, *Gladiator* ultimately critiques the limitations of the American Dream. The film's tragic conclusion—Maximus' death and the ambiguous future of Rome—reveals the inherent fragility of a vision built on both democratic ideals and imperialistic foundations. Gibson notes that cinematic narratives often reflect unresolved tensions within historical and ideological frameworks, exposing the contradictions that underpin collective aspirations (1577). In *Gladiator*, these contradictions manifest in the tension between Maximus' personal sacrifices and the systemic corruption that persists within Roman society. The film's portrayal of Rome as a fractured empire, incapable of achieving true unity or freedom, resonates with contemporary critiques of American socio-political systems, highlighting the cyclical nature of power and resistance.

Maniglier and Zabunyan argue that cinema, as a dispositif, shapes not only the stories it tells but also the ways audiences perceive and engage with history (153). In *Gladiator*, Scott leverages this capacity to construct a narrative that is both deeply personal and profoundly political. By intertwining Maximus' journey with broader questions about governance, morality, and identity, the film invites viewers to critically examine the ideals and contradictions of the American Dream. Its tragic conclusion serves as a poignant reminder that the pursuit of unity and freedom often remains an elusive and unattainable ideal, shaped as much by its failures as by its aspirations.

9. Concluding Thoughts and *Gladiator*'s Legacy

Utilizing Foucault's theories of power, surveillance, gaze, and identity as articulated in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), this paper examined the layered narrative and cinematic elements of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000). Through its depiction of the Colosseum, hierarchical structures, and character transformations, the film provided a critical lens for exploring the dynamics of authority, resistance, and identity in both the Roman Empire and contemporary sociopolitical contexts. The addition of current theoretical bases from Maniglier and Zabunyan (2018), Hamenstädt (2019), Gibson (2021), and Cárdenas (2017) allowed for the application of recent insights to Foucauldian analysis, connecting *Gladiator* to broader discourses on cinema's role as a dispositif for reflecting and shaping systems of power.

The paper demonstrated how Scott's cinematic techniques—ranging from spatial contrasts and lighting to mise-en-scène and narrative structure—critique the interplay of Republican and Imperial ideologies. Maximus' journey from general to gladiator to martyr serves as a microcosm for the broader tensions between individual agency and systemic control, revealing the fragility of both democratic aspirations and authoritarian governance. The study also highlighted how the film's tragic conclusion underscores the cyclical nature of power struggles and the elusiveness of unity and freedom within empires.

Foucault's concepts of spectacle and panopticism illuminated the mechanisms of control embedded in the Colosseum's hierarchical spaces, while Maniglier and Zabunyan's framework of cinema as a dispositif provided the means to analyze Scott's use of cinematic techniques to visualize power dynamics. Gibson's insights into cinematic historicity, Cárdenas' examination of spatial dispositifs, and Hamenstädt's analysis of cinema as a bridge for political theory further contextualized *Gladiator* within current theoretical frameworks, ensuring the analysis was grounded in recent scholarship.

Ultimately, *Gladiator* emerges as both a historical epic and a sociopolitical critique, intertwining its narrative of Roman power with broader

reflections on American imperialism and the contradictions of the American Dream. By foregrounding the complexities of power, identity, and resistance, the film invites viewers to question the sustainability of democratic ideals in the face of systemic inequality and corruption. Through its nuanced portrayal of Rome as both a fractured society and a mirror for contemporary anxieties, *Gladiator* reaffirms cinema's potential to engage critically with history, ideology, and the human condition.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Ali Eatesam for his valuable assistance in data collection, which greatly supported the development of this paper. His contribution was instrumental in ensuring the comprehensiveness of the research.

This article is not financially supported by any institute. It is not retrieved from a thesis or dissertation.