

THE HISTORICAL EPIC FILM: VISUALIZING REALITY THROUGH
CROWDS, CULTURE, AND COUNTERHISTORY

by

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PROPOSAL

This thesis will trace the revisionist history appropriated by the film epic as it relates to the cinema's unique aesthetic. The essay will cite Siegfried Kracauer's *The Mass Ornament* and other modernist theory as a means of analyzing classic (*Ben Hur*, *El Cid*, etc.) and contemporary (*Braveheart*, *Gangs of New York*, etc.) epics.

The student will meet with each reader during office hours to discuss progress and consider revisions, with the goal of producing a thirty to fifty page academic essay that appropriately considers the topics.

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Primary Advisor: Dr. Richard Burt
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The following thesis investigates the circumstances of the historical film epic with regard to history and the masses. Modernism, historicism, and cultural theory provide the theoretical foundation with which the essay navigates epic ideology and visual aesthetic. Three classic and three contemporary epics—*Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), *El Cid* (Anthony Mann, 1961), *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), and *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese, 2002)—provide pragmatic scenes and examples for analyzing the unique medium and considering the necessary exchanges between historical authenticity and visual grandeur. Several sets of images accompany the text for the purpose of exposing the conventions inherent to the depiction of masses in historical epic cinema and conflating historical revision with the filmmaking process.

The film epic genre maintains an inimitable set of financial and historical conventions that contribute to its excessive size and scope. Fred Niblo's 1925 version of the legendary *Ben-Hur* contributed to the epic's popularization in American cinema and introduced many movie-goers to the largest masses they had ever witnessed. Coincidences of cinematic excess followed the production, which early mogul and "boy genius" Irving Thalberg approached as one of his first projects upon his arrival at MGM in 1924. As supervisor of production, he inherited the task of overseeing production on *Ben-Hur*, which was shooting in Rome and already well over-budget. Thalberg replaced the title role and director, moved the entire production back to MGM studios in Culver City, and ordered the construction of a colosseum and several huge statues on a nearby lot to showcase the grandeur of the film. Thalberg, standing on a platform erected over the huge colosseum, oversaw construction of the biggest set in Hollywood history at the time, and hired nearly four thousand extras to fill the arena. By no small happenstance, the highest-paid executive controlling the most expensive silent film ever made found himself standing on a platform commanding thousands of men in an arena below him, just as Caesar had done nearly two millennia before. This anecdote allegorizes the supreme power over the masses exhibited by epic heroes or villains as the similar revisionist control the filmmakers hold. F. Scott Fitzgerald makes a similar observation, posthumously commending Thalberg's grasp of "the whole equation of pictures," the ultimate understanding of a visual medium, in his final novel, *The Last Tycoon* (1941).

Through both involvement in and consumption of mass media, the crowd found their place in the historical film epic. The historical epic, therefore, must be the point of departure for analyses contingent on visual representations of history via the multitudes. This project compels focus towards several critical theories. First, historicism, a rationalist approach to creating and modifying popular history, will clarify filmic conceptions of historical depiction. Their use of the anthropologist anecdote provides a means to discuss the episodic film scenes that subvert history for mass aesthetic. Second, Siegfried Kracauer's theories on mass culture, which both emphasize visual aesthetic and allegorize the modern crowd, contribute to basic ideological premises regarding the recurring epic masses and summarize its historical and filmic importance. These literary works laud cinema's distinct revisionist capability and express the historical epic's sacrifice of historical accuracy in favor of mass visual aesthetic. Many important historical epics will contribute to the centered discussion, which focuses on three classic and three contemporary epics: *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960), *El Cid* (Anthony Mann, 1961), *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), and *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese, 2002). Each of these films appropriately reconstitutes history into a dynamic form, enabling analyses of the exchange between altered history, the masses, and how both contribute to visual aesthetic. The films will provide illustrated models for theoretical exploration, thus elucidating the intimate connection shared by historical revision and the epic crowd.

Popular film concepts herald the movies' unique power to capture the essence of mass crowds. Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* elucidates the correlation between the cinematic medium and masses, or more acutely the aesthetic of the masses. His cultural theory, which intently considers the importance of the masses over panoramic visuals or impressive landscapes, recognizes the crucial power of aestheticized action. Due to the intense social concentration that accompanied the industrial revolution, present invocations of the crowd are more striking even than those in ancient Rome.

They became a social force of first magnitude. Warring nations resorted to levies on an unheard-of scale and identifiable groups yielded to the anonymous multitude which filled the big cities in the form of amorphous crowds. Walter Benjamin observes that in the period marked by the rise of photography the daily sight of moving crowds was still a spectacle to which eyes and nerves had to get adjusted....Hence the attraction which masses exerted on still and motion picture cameras from the outset (298).

Film art uniquely possesses the ability to capture the masses, not from a dearth of successful and creative artists before its inception, but because of the conditions of film's origin. The film camera and the modern crowd came into existence during the same period and have influenced each other distinctively. Where photography was finally able to capture the crowd from above and grasp its encompassing essence and awe-inspiring size, the film camera revolutionarily enabled the reproduction of motion and wide-spread exhibition of the mass form.

As Kracauer observes, film has depicted mass crowds since its birth; Auguste and Louis Lumiere's first screened project after inventing the cinematograph recorded a crowd of workers leaving a factory. The ideological and political issues accompanying factory work influence Kracauer's premise,

“community and personality perish when what is demanded is calculability,” the human components are lost in the imperious crowd (78). The industrial revolution (i.e. large-scale industrial systematization) preceded urban migration, specialized mechanization, and the capitalist boom which operate within the Marxist conceptions of social class division. The concentration of labor markets created a new mass. Furthermore, the concept of early cinema as a low art for the bourgeoisie’s consumption exposes the perplexity of Kracauer’s description: the only art form suitable for capturing the masses also captivates them. Indeed, the historical epic encapsulates every cinematic allusion to the masses by advancing a storyline that favors battles of mythic proportions, ambitious historical or religious moments that overwhelm the crowd of spectators, and the commanded garrisons of slaves or armies that the hero must either escape or dominate. By extension, no genre successfully captured mass audiences like the epic, which amounted to large box-office benefits for any studio that could amass the capital investment to create one. (Thomas 48-54)

Fellow Berliner and cultural critic Walter Benjamin observes, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, that the masses “first appeared in a disreputable form” (748). The form in Benjamin’s critique denotes the art of motion pictures, which was once culturally relegated to low potential due to the absorption of vaudeville talent and proletarian appeal in the late nineteenth century. Audiences’ mass appeal necessitates the potential financial profits and cultural infiltration that accompany a film’s success. By extension, the logical desire for richer stories and bigger productions follows, as if by some unspoken

accord between the means of production in Hollywood and the ticket-buying throngs; the hungry audience will reimburse the sizeable investment of a high quality picture. Indeed, some of the most expensive films ever made are among the highest grossing—the list of all-time blockbuster films reads like an epic anthology—including *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1956), *Titannic* (James Cameron, 1997), *Doctor Zhivago* (David Lean, 1965), *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), and the entire *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977 to 2005) catalog (Dirks).

HISTORY



Figure 1-1. Christ's crucifixion in *Ben-Hur*



Figure 1-4. The Scottish victory at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in *Braveheart*



Figure 1-2. Slave massacre at the Silarus river in *Spartacus*



Figure 1-5. Marcus Aurelius at war in Germania in *Gladiator*



Figure 1-3. Spanish siege of Valencia in *El Cid*



Figure 1-6. Parade celebrating the abolition of slavery in *Gangs of New York*

Popular critical characterizations of the epic will invariably describe a “larger than life” heroic tale—a hyperbolic assessment which also traditionally applies to superhero cartoons and Greek mythological episodes—with a longer-than-normal duration. This description creates a troubling dilemma: a genre

reliant on factual historic narratives can also be “larger than life,” connoting a surreal or hyper-real diegetic influence. The versatility of film as a visual medium assuages the contradiction-in-terms created by assuming a historical recreation under the pretense of a “larger” or reality-defying depiction, rendering grandiosity and exaggeration traits of the authentic past. For example, epic cinema attains mass appeal by making history subordinate to the potentially exciting film imagery. The creative process requires dedication to the medium above the source, or, as Irving Thalberg frequently reminded his writing staff: “Remember you are working in a visual medium.” So, too, does the viewer remember—whether consciously as an active observer or a passively as a spectator—in order to fully behold the epic experience. The way film epics analyze and translate history to the screen demonstrates their preference for visually-exciting narratives. In *Practicing New Historicism*, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt quote Clifford Geertz’s definition of “analysis:” sorting out the structures of signification and determining their social ground and import (20). This designation implies a great distinction between, for instance, someone analyzing the Bible for historical scholarship and someone adapting it for a film. The important “structures of signification” vary depending on their enterprise and use, and therefore translating any work to a visual medium potentially entails focus on traditionally unimportant elements. A film production, which must necessarily attract crowds, distills these historical episodes with mass crowds and lavish costumes to maintain a high level of audience excitement during its exorbitant running time.

In the story-telling process, the mode of translation or codification is moot without appropriate source material. History's significant influence provides the structure through which cultural codes can be translated. The historicists apply their circumstances to those of an anthropologist, whose conventions and language must weigh on the process of receiving and transcribing diverse cultural processes. Their example questions the interpretative methods that assist the scientist in distinguishing the cultural implications of a twitch, a wink, and a parody of a wink. For this interpretative dilemma, historicists apply two levels of description: "thin description," which describes the most basic physical actions, and "thick description," which applies setting, motivation, history, and the entire network of associative impulses (21).

Gallagher and Greenblatt credit the historical anecdote with the task of distinguishing thin from thick description. The anecdote resembles a microcosmic narrative (not unlike a film) that, regardless of social or cultural importance, can provide a relative basis for evaluating and reviewing history. The Christ parallel in *Ben-Hur* (Figure 1.1) transfers associative traits between history and epic myth, lending Christ's religious convictions and moral position to Judah and absorbing the aestheticized action. Many of the historically motivated scenes employ distinctive film style, cutting intermittently between an extreme long shot (the objective viewpoint of history, above the unfolding action) and subjective ground-level moments that place the viewer in the film actor's position. The enumerated differences in volition between a twitch and the multiple winks that differentiate thick description summarize the task of a film's actor, crediting the written text

with believability and nuanced natural action. If thin description and thick description correspond to source material and contextualized narrative actions respectively, then the historicist anecdote is a metaphor for the film scene, or the “thin” moments condensed and rationalized by the anthropological anecdote. The masses anchor the epic anecdote and lend credence to the historical setting with their form of appearance, which populates the narrative and provides socio-cultural characterizations with clothing and language.

The historicists admit that the anthropologist’s data are merely “constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (23). This distinction aligns the anthropologist with the modern epic filmmaker, whose explication of the historical anecdote into dramatic form constitutes their sciences, both of which involves attributing power and influence to the masses of people. Consider, for example, the one-dimensionality *Spartacus* or *Braveheart* would succumb to if their introductory voice-over narration continued throughout the film, like a scientist’s field observations, and ignored the contributions of screaming armies and other nationalist viewpoints. The film director and other technicians employ creative techniques to communicate the anecdote visually to the viewer. In *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, film scholar Martin M. Winkler argues that literature can employ film techniques just as film utilizes history. He describes Virgil’s imaginative writing in the *Aeneid* (1st century BC) as striking to “the extent to which he employs the techniques of a film director, of which montage is but one” (220). His explanation links the mythologized account in literary epic to the ostentatious

imagery and crosscutting that characterize the historical epic film. Just as the writer or director must incorporate visual cues into their work, the anthropologist must similarly distill their field notes to a certain degree that elicits logical comprehension from the reader:

The interpreter must be able to select or to fashion, out of the confused continuum of social existence, units of social action small enough to hold within the fairly narrow boundaries of full analytical attention, and this attention must be unusually intense, nuanced, and sustained.... The point is that to understand what people are up to in any culture you need to be acquainted "with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 26-27).

The epic filmmaker also controls this reduction process, combing history for fleeting, eccentric moments that, regardless of historical importance, translate well to the screen. The contemporary epic *Gangs of New York* bears little relation to accepted Civil War history, however its diegesis incorporates appropriate religious and racial themes into a modern reflection. Many critics rebuffed the film as cartoonish and overblown upon its release, descriptions which utterly compliment the form, considering the integration of exaggerated street gangs in New York's famous Bowery region (Figure 1-6) and political caricatures modeling Thomas Nast's 19th century Tammany Hall parodies. In this film, the epic masses take the form of a street gang, which subverts accepted national history and also provides an alternate to the overdone exploration of Northern versus Southern animosity and ideological distinctions.

Anti-historical narratives, whether satirical or dramatic, bear a distinct resemblance to anthropological theory or futurism, both of which create compelling narratives based on disparate past circumstances. *Braveheart* admits

this degree of fiction with its authoritative opening narration: “I shall tell you of William Wallace. Historians from England will say I am a liar, but history is written by those who have hanged heroes.” Concomitantly, the actor playing Robert the Bruce, who, according to historical accounts, survived by relying on ambition instead of dedicating himself to Wallace’s patriotism, also voices the narration sequences. This places Robert the Bruce’s character in a position to recount the film’s tale in hindsight, despite its divergence from accepted accounts of Wallace’s contribution to Scottish independence. Gallagher and Greenblatt describe the potential of cultural ahistoricity in *Practicing New Historicism*, linking anecdotes to the precise disruption of history. The anecdote specifically contributes to historical narratives by interrupting the “Big Stories,” accepted accounts of important historical figures. The big stories problematically conceive of history in terms of well known and influential personages and ignore the anonymous mass, whose contribution potentially outweighs that of the few and whose importance deserves recognition.

We sought the very thing that made anecdotes ciphers to many historians: a vehement and cryptic particularity that would make one pause or even stumble on the threshold of history. But for this purpose, it seemed that only certain kinds of anecdotes would do: outlandish and irregular ones held out the best hope for preserving the radical strangeness of the past by gathering heterogeneous elements—seemingly ephemeral details, overlooked anomalies, suppressed anachronisms—into an ensemble where they ground and figure, “history” and “text” continually shifted (51).

Under this model, anecdotes potentially re-signify accepted history into more subjective, fictionalized accounts. Previously uninterpretable narratives become dynamic when viewed through the prism of an anecdote, through which “history

would cease to be a way of stabilizing texts; it would instead become part of their enigmatic being.” Films like *Gangs of New York* and *El Cid* oppose the resolute historical foundation used in *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) or *Gettysburg* (Ronald F. Maxwell, 1993) and instead provide a cryptic approach to history by reclaiming Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar or William Cutting from the historians and submitting their namesakes to legend. In their respective films, they enlist the power of the masses instead of submitting to their historically individualist isolation.

From the very beginning of epic history, anecdotes reveal, based on their effect, how the mass gathering influences its unique accounts. The historical film epic began with several early twentieth-century silent re-creations of the ancient world in Italy. Historical epics seemed the obvious route for the Italian film industry, especially considering the ease of composing a Roman mob using surviving ancient monuments and inexpensive locals for background filler. *Messalina* (directed by Enrico Guazzoni, 1923) signified the apex of this trend with its then-unparalleled chariot climax in the Circus Maximus. Frank Niblo’s *Ben-Hur* (1925), which famously emulated that chariot scene, was filmed on location in Rome. The seemingly limitless financial backing from Hollywood increased the time and money spent on the American silent epic, tying up Italian production studios in the process and leaving them little time for domestic Italian features, and eventually crippling the Italian film industry after its deficits from World War I. Ironically, the nation that popularized the film epic and exported it to worldwide markets was irreversibly impaired by an American epic production that

borrowed its climax from an Italian film from two years earlier. These circumstances compels focus towards the film epic in history, and how an epic mass-gathering adopted from Italian history capably overwhelmed the nation that popularized it. (Bondanella 1-12)

Close scrutiny of “new historicist” theory reveals its allegorical relation to film media. Attention to detail and analysis of codified signification recall the continuity system, the rules by which film scenes can abridge time and space without disturbing their chronological appearance, and other means of structuralist communication to the film viewer (i.e. communicative lighting, editing, composition, etc.). These essentials techniques distinguish the descriptive elements that lend credence to non-fiction narratives. Furthermore, the essay reveals the framework of conventions that transform historical episodes (thin description) into potentially anachronistic cinematic referents. The procedure describes the new function of the historical anecdote, which “would not, as in the old historicism, epitomize epochal truths, but would instead undermine them,” suggesting that history and style conflict with the anecdote (Gallagher and Greenblatt 51). *Ben-Hur*'s narrative epitomizes this trend, showcasing a fictionalized character morally signified by Christ parallels. Background references to Jesus's famous sermon and crucifixion (Figure 1-1) historically situate the film while also undermining traditional New Testament chronicles in favor of an illusory tale of revenge and redemption. Similarly, *Spartacus* retroactively politicizes the Roman slave wars of 1st century BC by crosscutting between Spartacus and Senator Crassus hyping their respective

armies. Gallagher and Greenblatt implement the anecdote as a tool to look past familiar documented accounts and reassess historical dilemmas from their roots to recover new branches of thought.

The anecdote could be conceived as a tool with which to rub literary texts against the grain of received notions about their determinants, revealing the fingerprints of the accidental, suppressed, defeated, uncanny, abjected, or exotic—in short, the nonsurviving—even if only fleetingly.... The histories one wanted to pursue through the anecdote might, therefore, be called “counterhistories,” which it would be all the more exhilarating to launch if their destinations were as yet undetermined and their trajectories lay athwart the best traveled routes (52).

The filmed anecdote, although part of a researched historic narrative, disrupts accepted notions about the past and creates new, albeit circumstantial, routes to explore history. Greenblatt and Gallagher assume the phrase “counterhistory” to effect a radical break from history, an “assault on the *grands récits* inherited from the last century” (52). *Grands récits*, or great narrative, corresponds to the dominant historical accounts and the methods by which they are conceived. Attempts at counterhistory arose to combat and uproot accepted origins and their logical implications. The *grands récits*, argues religious scholar Amos Funkenstein, originated in self-serving dogma imposed by powerful religious figures. Counterhistory, initially suggested to contradict non-secular narratives, spoke for the unrecognized masses and provided a new argumentative device to rethink the histories written by the powerful few.

Accordingly, counterhistory proves useful for alternative agendas (i.e. “feminist, anti-racist, working-class”) (53). The anecdote supplied an outlet for historical fictions and hyperbole alike, disrupting “history’s normal epistemological

assumptions.” *Gladiator* utilizes a counterhistory, beginning authentically with Marcus Aurelius’s campaign in Germania but concentrating on a fictional war general instead (Figure 1-5). The emperor writes in a book, presumably his *Mediations* (1st century), just before his death, which sets the narrative in motion. Interestingly, his writings include reflections on stoic philosophy, and his death in the film motivates the conflict between Commodus, an emotional egotist, and Maximus, the classic and determined stoic hero. This pattern bears a resemblance to a new historicist technique that “develops ‘counterfactual’ arguments in social and economic history” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 53). *Gladiator* resolves conflicting ideas about Roman leadership by applying counterfactual conditions, resembling “alternate histories,” the literary genre utilized in postwar fiction.

The anecdote’s agency makes it appropriate for visual media, wherein the aesthetic arrangements could re-enact ancient processions for the modern audiences. The anecdote dynamizes history’s potential, opening a spectrum of insight and conjecture where an unchallenged chronicle once existed. Similarly, the historical film instantiates the same conditions: the historical bases do not willfully restrict the potential plot twists from the masses’ influence or surrender to expected outcomes. Gallagher and Greenblatt summarize historicism and the anecdote as “a conduit for carrying these counterhistorical insights and ambitions into the field of literary history” (54). Historicist reality, after all, enables the transposition of distant history into the modern experience. New historicism allegorizes the historical epic film, which commutes accepted written history into

a pliable medium. The epic filmmaker, as interpreter of the grand narrative, molds history and utilizes the anecdote and film language to retroactively translate past circumstances to the present aesthetic, allowing for the ever-present influence of the masses to contribute. The camera's objective view mirrors the produced counterhistory, revealing eccentricities and problematizing the canons of history.

Art history places the emergence of the historical epic around the conception of modernism, a cultural trend that advocates the embracement of modern society over the established historical traditions. The emergence of film and modernism acutely coincide: both assume the influence of industrialization in creating new social conditions and both forms became popular in the last decade of the nineteenth century. This similarity inspires modern cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer to compare the appearance of crowds in the cinema to comparable modernist writings. He cites artistic examples which testify to the spectacle of the emerging urban masses, including Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd*. Another of Baudelaire's works, *The Painter of Modern Life*, discusses Poe's story, recalling the episode of a recovering convalescent relishing the sight of a passing crowd and his peculiar curiosity of an anonymous man within it, the sight of whom motivated him. Baudelaire's essay, usually considered the manifesto on modernism, mainly emphasizes a departure from the emulation and reproduction of previous artistic trends and focuses on an artist immersed in the modern moment and inspired by the crowd. Kracauer observes in *The Mass Ornament*, his seminal 1927 essay

on cultural theory, that “the position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from the epoch’s judgment about itself” (75).

These “surface level expressions,” by virtue of their unconscious nature, resemble the historicist anecdote by providing a glimpse of the era’s essence without the clouding judgments.

Film history also links the emergence of modernism with the historical epic. The same year as Kracauer’s celebration of the masses, the 1925 version of *Ben-Hur* was re-released in America due to its huge popularity and Cecil B DeMille’s *King of Kings*, a lavish production retelling Christ’s story with thousands of extras, debuted at the opening of world-famous Grauman’s Chinese Theater. The popularity of this release enabled DeMille to direct *Cleopatra* (1934) six years later, which was widely panned in Italy, where the film epic had originated. Over two decades later, all three films were remade by a new wave of epic directors. History repeated itself when Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *Cleopatra* (1963) went well over budget, just as *Ben-Hur* had in 1925. The opulent expenditures on *Cleopatra*, which holds the all-time record for the most expensive production (adjusted for inflation), allowed prop and costume suppliers to raise their prices exceedingly, thus disabling Italian producers from producing films of this style. *Cleopatra* had been shot partially on location in Italy, where *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914) was filmed fifty years earlier. The silent film runs nearly three hours, incorporates keynote historical scenes such as Hannibal’s venture over the Alps with elephants and the burning of a Roman fleet, utilizes a dolly to track

through monumental sets from long shot to close up, and employs a fictitious character to elicit personal emotion from the distant historical setting (Bondanella 4).

Cabiria, clearly one of the earliest films to compile the major elements of the modern historical epic, almost certainly influenced *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). Griffith's film appropriates all of the aforementioned techniques and contributes to the great number of films that historically recall a previous war during periods of conflict. The film's references to the Spanish-American War elicited particularly strong issues due to the great contribution of yellow journalism, sensationalized reporting that establishes a sort of propagandist counterhistory. *The Birth of a Nation's* original audience would have recalled the previous war, as does film scholar Amy Kaplan, who suggests that the war "informs the genealogy of American cinema" in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U. S. Culture* (147). The war explicitly informs *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), the classic biopic of William Randolph Hearst whose newspapers inspired the public outcry to declare war on Spain. The famous scene that ends with a chorus line of girls singing praises to Kane, the fictionalized Hearst, originally called for him to engage in a lengthy discussion of imperial policy with the head of his newspaper's writing staff. Remarkably, the film trades off between two groups that depend on symmetrical formations and reduce the person involved to an unthinking body: the army and the chorus line. Substituting a political discussion for a dancing spectacle draws attention to the delicate interplay between history, visual aesthetic, and the composition of bodies.

THE MASSES



Figure 2-1. Chariot race in *Ben-Hur*



Figure 2-4. Scottish rebellion in *Braveheart*



Figure 2-2. Slave rebellion in *Spartacus*



Figure 2-5. Germania battle in *Gladiator*



Figure 2-3. Moor invasion in *El Cid*



Figure 2-6. Riot suppression in *Gangs of New York*

Walter Benjamin begins the last chapter of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* by describing the mass as “a matrix from which all traditional behavior towards the work of art issues today” (748). His generalization conflates several instances of the modern artistic crowd that bear enumeration: the mass assembled in a work of art, the historic mass cited in art, and the mass spectators accumulated by art. Mass spectatorship differs the most

from the other two forms because participation relies on the individual desire to confront the mass itself. Benjamin elucidates this dilemma in terms of the camera's potential to capture the crowd, citing that the camera's presence at parades and sporting events signifies the masses' desire to confront itself.

This process, whose significance need not be stretched, is intimately connected with the development of the techniques of reproduction and photography. Mass movements are usually discerned more clearly by a camera than by the naked eye. A bird's-eye view best captures gatherings of hundreds of thousands. And even though such a view may be as accessible to the human eye as it is to the camera, the image received by the eye cannot be enlarged the way a negative is enlarged. This means that mass movements, including war, constitute a form of human behavior which particularly favors mechanical equipment (750).

The cinema enables the individual to transcend the mass and view it from a distance to grasp the totality. Some have argued, however, that the majority of audiences attend movies to be entertained and not attentive, intelligent viewers. Tom Gunning presents the possibility that early audiences invested such intense belief in the moving images that it amounted to visual trauma. In *An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator*, he lambastes the first film audiences' lack of ideological preparation and likens them to "savages in their primal encounter with the advanced technology of Western colonialists, howling and fleeing in impotent terror before the power of the machine" (819).

This audience of the first exhibitions exists outside of the willing suspension of disbelief, the immediacy of their terror short-circuiting even disavowal's detour of "I know very well...but all the same." Credulity overwhelms all else, the physical reflex signaling a visual trauma. Thus conceived, the myth of initial terror defines film's power as its unprecedented realism, its ability to convince spectators that the moving image was, in fact, palpable and dangerous, bearing towards them with physical impact. The image had

taken life, swallowing, in its relentless force, any consideration of representation—the imaginary perceived as real (819).

Gunning constructs the vision of an audience of temperate and logical guinea pigs that cannot help but respond viscerally to the illusion of movement projected in flashes. Benjamin refers to this criticism as “the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator” (*The Work of Art* 748). Gunning’s preliminary critique ignores the focus required by the film medium, signaling the attentive viewer to information, the absence of which makes the narrative less intelligible. For example, Maximus’s revelatory removal of his helmet for Commodus in *Gladiator* references a similar moment in *Ben-Hur*, both of which are preceded by informative music and visual cues that enlighten the incredulous spectator. These scenes entrust the viewer to decode the filmic cues and confidently rely on focused audience observation, rather than primal emotion.

Gunning later admits that the visual trauma signals something deeper: what Kracauer calls the “fragmentation of modern experience” (831). Kracauer describes this fragmentation in *Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s Picture Palaces* where he attributes it to the impersonal rationalized style of the modern atmosphere. The example of factory work surely influences his premise, which assigns movie theaters the task of distracting the masses from labor and social conditions. Gunning concludes his essay by resituating the audience’s primitive fear; they desperately want to be distracted and their screams release the serious anxiety of the modern moment. Kracauer also amends his picture palace experience, writing about the dystopia created by the live shows that

accompanied films in the first decades of the cinema. The live performers enact a supplementary show, not realizing that their movement detracts attention from the screen and emphasizes the two-dimensionality of the projected image, thus destroying the movie's illusion of reality. Kracauer and Gunning's dissimilar analyses of the cinematic spectacle suggest that mass spectatorship involves a unique interplay between Benjamin's poles: distraction and concentration.

Gladiator, along with most other historical epics, explicitly references mass spectatorship within the film. "Sword and sandal" epics, typically descendant from Roman war or epic literature, exhibit the colosseum arenas as ancient theaters. The edifice assumes the function of a multiplex, organizing the crowds and directing their focus towards a central image (Figure 2-1). Siegfried Kracauer compares this likeness to popular dance troupes during the late nineteenth century, the Tiller Girls, whose precise visual uniformity and kaleidoscopic movements captivated audiences.

These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics; ...performances of the same geometric precision are taking place in what is always the same packed stadium. One need only glance at the screen to learn that the ornaments are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits. The regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier (*The Mass Ornament* 75-76).

The viewing crowd's likeness to the objectified cinematic spectacle creates a symmetry about the camera's filming and projection. Similarly, the Roman colosseum episodes transform into a historical anecdote, enabling the filmed recreation to highlight the roaring crowd's visual grandeur and the central hero's

battles equally. In *The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies*, Kracauer adds that simple historical depiction deceives the audience, who hunger for epic history that parallels modern struggles:

Since one always runs the danger, when picturing current events, of turning easily excitable masses against powerful institutions that are in fact often not appealing, one prefers to direct the camera towards a Middle Ages that the audience will find harmlessly edifying. The further back the story is situated historically, the more audacious filmmakers become. They will risk depicting a successful revolution in historical costumes in order to induce people to forget modern revolutions, and they are happy to satisfy the theoretical sense of justice by filming struggles for freedom that are long past (293).

Kracauer's analysis of the historical film culminates in a dismissal of historical, and thereby factual, efficacy. In this circumstance, the period piece can assume an earlier time frame as a departure from the burden of accuracy rather than an acceptance of it. Academic records indicate that *El Cid* ignores much of Rodrigo Díaz de Bivar's factual exploits as a warrior for hire, fighting more often for compensation than any religious or moral certitude. Why, then, was this character's story so appealing as a platform for a historical epic film? *El Cid's* historical ambivalence suggests that it's story is more appropriately detailed for potential aesthetic achievement than realism.



Figure 3-1. Galley rowing in *Ben-Hur*



Figure 3-4. Cheering soldiers in *Braveheart*



Figure 3-2. Slave assembly in *Spartacus*



Figure 3-5. Roman cavalry in *Gladiator*



Figure 3-3. Spanish troops in *El Cid*



Figure 3-6. Irish church congregation in *Gangs of New York*

Kracauer's aesthetic description of the Tiller Girls focuses on their performance of emulation and repetition. They are likened to the film's performers, wherein their acting and involvement in a character role, no matter how important, is meager and unnecessary without the remainder of the operative whole, the mass. *El Cid* opens with a revelatory glance at this phenomenon, as Rodrigo carries a cross through a barren landscape (Figure 4-3). In retrospect, his great battles and leadership are abstract and ineffectual without the massive army of followers. As the stand-in Christ figure, he showcases the absence of the epic's ornament: a solitary figure, symbolism without spectacle. The grand armies and battle sequences (Figure 2-3), far from accurate or historically meaningful, are a counterhistorical platform to restage the myth for audience consumption. Along these lines, Kracauer states that "the

human figure enlisted in the mass ornament has begun the exodus from lush organic splendor and the constitution of individuality toward the realm of anonymity to which it relinquishes itself when it stands in truth and when the knowledge radiating from the basis of the man dissolves the contours of visible natural form” (83). Rodrigo evolves from the stark individuality of that opening scene through a gauntlet of ideological takeovers, finally arriving at his own death for the cause of uniting the masses. This unity incorporates both the fictional re-emergence of Spanish sovereignty in the film and the symbolic finality of the plot, which is to say that Rodrigo’s death sums up the narrative concerns to efficiently end the movie.

The length of any epic film necessitates a gradually apparent connection between the beginning and the end of the story, a narrative bridge to summarize the film’s journey, without which the plot could be split into any number of smaller movies. Rodrigo’s first and last scenes associate his character with something beyond the historical personage that it was based on, and in fact, something beyond concrete realism. For instance, his recovery of the destroyed church’s cross bares no immediate relief to the burden of plot; it only serves to re-signify the character; this implementation begins to unravel the true and more logical past. The last scene also departs not only from authentic reality, but also from genuine possibility. Kracauer elaborates on this trope, saying that “these practices...seek to recapture just what the mass ornament had happily left behind...that is, exalting the body by assigning it meanings which emanate from it and may indeed be spiritual but which do not contain the slightest trace of

reason” (85-86). This point furthers director Anthony Mann’s obvious preference for aesthetics, favoring spiritual signification over reasoning. Rodrigo’s final ride through battle parades a dead man through an entire advancing army and evokes a legendary or mythic achievement that flies in the face of common sense.

The appearance of Christ also figures heavily in spiritual signification and mass aesthetic. The Judeo-Christian majority expects religious signification from the epic genre, which in just under ten years delivered Charlton Heston to the theater-going audience as Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, a Jewish prince intersecting with Christ in *Ben-Hur* (Figure 4-1), the Christian hero of the Spanish crusades in *El Cid* (Figure 4-3), John the Baptist in *The Greatest Story Every Told* (George Stevens, 1965), and Michelangelo as he paints the Sistine Chapel in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (Carol Reed, 1965). Keeping in mind the powerful mass aesthetic that accompanies biblical retellings of the “Sermon on the Mount” or crucifixion, it follows logically that Christ induces intense interest for an epic-scale production. Indeed, the famed crucifixion pose seems unavoidable due to the intense religious/historical signification that it lends characters and scenarios.



Figure 4-1. Judah Ben-Hur in *Ben-Hur*



Figure 4-4. William Wallace in *Braveheart*



Figure 4-2. Spartacus in *Spartacus*



Figure 4-5. Maximus in *Gladiator*



Figure 4-3. Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar in *El Cid*



Figure 4-6. Happy Jack in *Gangs of New York*

Kracauer's final description of the modern mass ornament clarifies its application to *El Cid*.

Enterprises that ignore our historical context and attempt to reconstruct a form of state, a community, a mode of artistic creation that depends upon a type of man who has already been impugned by contemporary thinking—a type of man by who by all rights no longer exists—such enterprises do not transcend the mass ornament's empty and superficial shallowness but flee from its reality.

The mass ornament of *El Cid* depends upon Rodrigo's character, who by the end of the film no longer exists to the audience. It becomes clear in retrospect that the history has been taken for a ride, that the character's signification, upon which the entire story is based, are emptied during the last scene. Mann's epic retraces the authentic story through a funhouse mirror, with the goal of depicting the grand aesthetic of Medieval Spanish warfare shrouded in a false history.

Kracauer concludes his description of the masses with the assurance that the

aesthetic value will replace historical reality “through its confrontation of truth, in fairy tales,” a perfect theoretical analog of the historicist anecdote (86).

Mass psychology also influences the historical epic, where very few characters stand apart from the crowds. William Wyler’s *Ben-Hur*, for example, spans nearly four hours and has just thirteen credited actors. It contains some of the most famous scenes in epic history, including the galley rowing through a sea battle and the chariot competition, utilizing over 15,000 anonymous extras. These scenes emphasize an anomaly that is unique to the epic masses: the crowd assumes the will of its leader. Kracauer compares this reaction to the concentric ridges undulating outward from the center of a wave. “Similarly,” he says in *The Group as Bearer of Ideas*, “every idea which strikes the extant social world evokes in that world a response whose course is determined by general factors” (143). With the addition of the masses, the epic’s protagonist overcomes the lone decisiveness of the typical heroes in Western or adventure films.

Whereas it is true that a socially effective idea is cast out into the world by individual personalities, its actual corporeality is produced by the group. The individual does generate and proclaim the idea, but it is the group that bears it and makes sure it is realized. Political parties advocate the achievement of certain goals, and clubs are formed for various purposes: there are groups of the most varied makeup (Kracauer, *The Group as Bearer of Ideas* 143-144).

Gladiator exemplifies this crowd psychology, particularly after Maximus fights anonymously as a masked slave in the colosseum. Physique and speed determine his survival, but the uncharacteristic forum of the colosseum derives its decisions from the Roman mob, whose cheers determine life and death for unsuccessful combatants. The great arena is hermetically sealed in the film,

made apparent by the whole crowd's responsiveness despite the impossibility of everyone seeing and hearing many of the distant battles or infinitesimal actions. The most obvious example involves Maximus removing his helmet to satisfy the emperor's request to know his identity. Rampant gasps and name-cheering accompany the revelation, regardless of the feasibility that any of the crowd of Roman citizens would recognize his significance. This condition, far from accidental, discloses the intentional alignment of the mob with Maximus as well as their preference to see him alive, foreshadowing their future commitment to the attentive film viewer.

Spartacus operates with the same decisive powers entrusted to the mass, although their convictions inspire the narrative drive. The aforementioned Roman mobs contribute little more than visceral binary responses, whereas the slave armies in *Spartacus* live and die for their convictions of freedom and their strength in unification. Ideo-centric assemblies in the historical epic generally commit fully and "arise and perish with this idea; their unity is fully encompassed by a specific concept that will come to life through them" (Kracauer, *The Group* 144). Spartacus assembles the slave uprising and, just as in *Gladiator*, they are sealed inside their diegetic space until their decision to fight resolves the narrative, the slaves' march to the sea only to find their ships rerouted. Before Spartacus decides to turn back and fight Crassus in Rome, Levantus offers safe passage to him and his officers, which Spartacus quickly rebukes, thus demonstrating Kracauer's claim that "the absolutely sovereign idea evolves in a sphere impervious to any individual impulses; the particular will is irrelevant to it"

(145). The autonomous individual disintegrates in the crowd, or as Maximus reminds his fellow slaves in *Gladiator*: “If we stay together, we survive.”

These attitudes, shared by the masses in these films, recall the physical process of industrialized factory work. The intensely specialized tasks of modern factory labor require that each participant perform a partial task without necessarily understanding the whole, paralleling the film crowd, which frequently resembles a traveling commune in *Spartacus* and *El Cid*. The factory also allegorizes the filmmaking process, which incorporates hundreds of artisans and technicians each dedicated to one particular aspect of the process. Only the director or producer occasionally occupy a position that parallels the film epic’s audience: to grasp the entirety of the mass of participants. Siegfried Kracauer implies that another art genre also distills our cultural and societal constructions, noting that the detective novel frequently resorts to the hotel lobby as a matrix for locating characters or developing new narrative threads. He appropriates the hotel lobby as an “inverted image of the house of god,” accommodating characters with an empty space for them to occupy, void of any necessity to worship (175). This metaphor applies to discussions of the film epic less for religious references than as a formula for two opposing masses. The epic antagonist, the filmic analog of god, gathers a congregation in his name and reaps the benefits of their combined power. The epic hero only fulfills the duties of the hotel manager, presiding over an ideological or political rejection, in reaction to the threat of the antagonist’s power. (Kracauer, *The Hotel Lobby* 173-178)



Figure 5-1. Tiberius Caesar in *Ben-Hur*



Figure 5-4. King Edward the Longshanks in *Braveheart*



Figure 5-2. Marcus Licinius Crassus in *Spartacus*



Figure 5-5. Emperor Commodus in *Gladiator*



Figure 5-3. Ben Yussuf in *El Cid*



Figure 5-6. William "Bill the Butcher" Cutting in *Gangs of New York*

The epic villain resides above the masses in a position of power. His movements hold the power to direct the thousands of men whose eyes remain focused on him, awaiting a sign. The attention riveted on Caesar's grasp of a cloth that signifies the start of the chariot race (Figure 5-1), Ben Yussuf's military commands from a distant tower (Figure 5-3), or the direction of the Roman emperor's hand that corresponds to life or death (Figure 5-5), signifies their supreme importance to the epic crowd. Even during Prince Edward's marriage ceremony in *Braveheart*, he turns and glances at his father, motivating the

camera to focus on the real impetus of the scene: the King's control over his son and subjects (Figure 5-4).

The historical narrative is driven by the hero/villain opposition and the unspoken promise to the film's audience that the conclusion will resolve it through the death of one or both of the conflicting leaders. In fact, between the six epics of focus, three end with the death of both leaders (*El Cid*, *Braveheart*, and *Gladiator*), two end with the villain's death at the hero's hands (*Ben-Hur*, and *Gangs of New York*), and *Spartacus* stands alone with Crassus condemning Spartacus to die on the crucifix. Spartacus's death, however, does not oppose the significance of his uprising, which advocated resistance to subjugation. The stressed importance on the main character reveals another inequality, which Martin Winkler alludes to in his description of the Aeneid:

Bodies will litter the ground on both sides. Montage and camera shifts give rapidity of motion to the external action, which mirrors the agitated emotions of the participants. Also effective is the alternation between mass and individual, letting the champions stand out against the background of their forces. The fight is essentially between Aeneas and Turnus, but the principal victims will be the masses on both sides.

Do these films suggest that the hero's potential success justifies the thousands of bodies that litter the screen (Figures 1-2 and 1-4)? They clearly spare no expense to brandish the visual trauma considering the leper colony and sea battles in *Ben-Hur*, the crucifixes that alternate from foreground to horizon on the Appian Way in *Spartacus*, the knight combat and army invasions in *El Cid*, the slaughters and final dismemberment in *Braveheart*, the decapitations and impalements in *Gladiator*, and the opening and closing battles in *Gangs of New*

York that both create rivers of blood. The answer, it seems, has more to do with the images than the story. As with the newspaper journalism that accompanied the Spanish-American war or the alternate histories offered in fiction novels, the rivalry of competing factions and the dependence on historical fact occupy a position subordinate to the imagery it inspires. The historical epic implements a counterhistory by subjecting historical legend to the cinematic spectacle, from which the masses are inseparable.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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