

American Beauty, Gladiator, and the New Imperial Humanitarianism

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The colonial/imperial paradigm did not die with the formal end of colonialism . . . Indeed, one could speak of a “submerged” imperial presence in many films.

— Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*

Toward the end of the climactic scene of *Gladiator*, Maximus is either dead or dying on the Colosseum floor, the republic may or may not be restored, and Lucilla is revealed to be . . . wearing a terrific strappy sandal. And don't think the ladies in the audience didn't notice. Kenneth Cole makes a version of the Roman sandal and now can't keep enough of them in stock.

—“When in Rome,” *Newsweek*

Introduction:

In his essay “Cowboys and Free Markets,” Stanley Corkin historically situates U.S. imperial discourses in the Western film genre. Popular during a time of post-war U.S. global expansionism, the Western re-elaborates the cultural “need for settlement and nationalism” (68). According to Corkin, this thematic appears in all Westerns. But the post-World War II era in America makes particular use of the genre: “the repressed dimension of westerns is their relationship to imperialism—and it is their indirect means of considering such activity that makes them the genre of the period” (71). During the post-war shift toward an aggressive U.S. expansionism (militarily, economically, and politically), a suitable cultural metaphor for explaining national policy to the larger population was found in the frontier trope of the Western. The geography of the old-west is physically outside socialization and civilization, and it provides a place “in which individuals of magnitude can assert their sense of order” (72).

But this isn't the 50s. And the agents of order no longer ride horses. The films of the 50's facilitated a national and cultural discourse of discovery and conflict during a burgeoning Cold War. But the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s seemingly left the U.S. a “Global Leader” (as our policy makers like to remind us). And if post-war Hollywood set the stage and reassured a United States audience that working towards global market expansionism was a worthy project, then our current cinematic narratives facilitate a different role now that the global boundaries have been penetrated.

This essay hopes to illustrate the ways in which recent Academy Award winners for Best Picture like *American Beauty* (1999) and *Gladiator* (2000) re-elaborate for the “American” consumerist audience that Western and capitalist models of the social arena should inform the current phase of globalization. Such a claim entails at least two parts: the choice of films, and their distinct role in the larger discourse on globalization. My decision to restrict this analysis to the millennial Academy Award winners for Best Picture is not haphazard. The Awards bestow a degree of popular prestige upon the winning films, helping to label them, for both national and international publics, as films worthy of being seen. Secondly, the winning of the Academy Award for Best Picture also allows the movies a second circulation. For our purposes, this often means a guaranteed re-distribution of the film's surface and sublimated narratives to a mass audience.[1]

These films possess an influential ideological role precisely because of their notoriety. Through wide distribution and circulation networks, they offer a particular image of the world to the U.S. audience. That is, these films can be read in terms of their contribution to a particularly “American” discourse on the

varied material, economic, political, and cultural networks that are Globalization (even though globalization may not be the surface theme of their narratives). And while we tend to think of globalization in terms of “networks,” or as a process resisting the linear operations of power and constructions of meaning that defined traditional frameworks of imperialism, Western capitalist countries, and the U.S. especially, exert a tremendous pressure on the flow of these networks.[2] These films play a political role by indirectly reaffirming the validity of that potentially Imperial pressure. But I am also interested in these films precisely because they may offer a more complicated representation of the current phase of globalization. Targeting a U.S. audience requires the discourse of globalization to follow at least two, sometimes simplistic and sometimes ambiguous, currents. One current finds its voice in images of cosmopolitanism and the seemingly natural spread of Western-style democracy (capitalism) across the world; the other current is sometimes invoked in images of individualism and affluence which openly ignore the history of imperialist relationships which inform an imbalance in global wealth. These two turn-of-the-millennium Award winners for Best Picture demonstrate, I think, each of these trends and a shift towards a new imperial humanitarianism. That is, they mask these imperial currents within seemingly anti-imperial, humanitarian narratives (such as the critique of soulless materialism in *American Beauty* and the struggle out of slavery and against oppression in *Gladiator*).

Globalization and Film for a U.S. Audience

Globalization is both a popular and contested concept. By invoking the term, Western scholars and policymakers often paint a picture of world relations that favor, in the words of Anthony Giddens, “social connections across time and space” that appear mutually reciprocal: “a dialectical process” (64). This image of world connectivity quietly ignores that Western transnational corporations remain the principal beneficiaries of globalization. Indeed, it can be argued that it takes a single global power before globalization has a possibility of being realized. I am not suggesting that this global power is total (although that may be its secret desire). Homi Bhabha’s sense that “hybridity intervenes in the exercise of authority” (114) marks out the ambivalent and non-totalizing effect of colonial desire and discourse on local cultures. Yet, there is remarkably little confusion that globalization does not mean the globalization of socialism, for example. In its current form, globalization undeniably exclaims capitalism as its master-narrative. Fernando Coronil calls this phenomenon the “globalcentrism” of neoliberal capitalism. It is the exploitive, expansion-driven nature of globalcentrism that finds a functional continuity with imperialism. The discourse of globalization, according to Coronil, evokes “the potential equality and uniformity of all peoples and cultures” at the same time “it conceals the highly concentrated sources of power from which it emanates” (369). It is precisely this ambivalence that both *American Beauty* and *Gladiator* re-articulate. Coronil has no druthers calling this “a particularly pernicious imperialist modality of domination” (369). As such, when I analyze the sublimated imperialist narratives in the two films, I am specifically concerned with how these narratives both reaffirm and problematize capitalist logics in the discourse of globalization.

Globalization’s relationship with capitalism is perhaps its least divisive issue. Liu Kang argues it is “capitalism disguised” (164). Masao Miyoshi, insisting global interconnectedness is centuries old, distinguishes this current phase in its “expansion in the trade and transfer of capital” (248). Both Anthony Giddens and John Tomlinson situate globalization in modernity, a key feature of which is capitalism. If capitalism’s logics are at the very heart of the current model of globalization, then the same act of justifying the disproportionate distribution of resources and imbalances of power that informs capitalism will surface in the affluent discourse of globalism. This asymmetry is the focus of Tomlinson’s definition of globalization as complex connectivity: an “ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences” (2). A language of dependency interrupts Giddens’ sense of a mutual dialectic by drawing in the material tensions of globalization. Whereas Giddens assumes that interconnections between the local and global take place dialectically—a conceptual framework which seemingly exonerates global power brokers from any neo-colonialist guilt—Tomlinson’s model complicates this simple notion of global connectivity. He sees in globalization an “unbalanced dialectic” (61), held in place partly by the “imaginative poverty” (136) of the affluent concerning exploited others.[3] What begins to surface in the discussion of globalization are two images of interconnection: connections of access and connections of dependency/responsibility. The latter is reciprocal, and thus allows our popular discussions of globalization to escape “globalcentrism” and foreground the interrelationships binding

distant locales in networks of mutual responsibility (and hence, parity). The former is imperial and expansionist, and it is an image of globalization wherein a relatively few political, cultural, and economic powers presume a “right” to access distant locales or to define the interconnections which mark globalization in a manner dismissive of its real imbalance.

Cinema brings an interesting complication into this analytic project. First, the global media industry, of which cinema is a significant part, carries both a material and ideological role in globalization. Herman and McChesney explain, “although global media are only one part of the overall expansion and spread of an increasingly integrated global corporate system . . . [their] news and entertainment provide an informational and ideological environment that helps sustain the political, economic, and moral basis for marketing goods and for having a profit driven social order” (10). In addition, the message of globalism itself is multilayered. At one moment it ushers the values of capitalism and consumerism to, in the words of Rupert Murdoch, “the farthest reaches of the Globe,”[4] at the same time it reassures its imperial audience that their role as the beneficiaries of an imbalanced global politic is both innocent and necessary. Cinematic images help to inform a culture about its relationship to the rest of the world. And since the dominant European and American film industry “inherited and disseminated a hegemonic colonial discourse” (Shohat & Stam, 103), a productive critical analysis should begin by reading the tensions and connections between the “American” audience and the “imperial filmic fictions” (103) distributed by the culture industry: fictions which help to shore-up a model of globalcentrism.

The analysis of U.S. film and its many-faceted role in the discourse of globalization should carry a sense of urgency. Although cinema is only one aspect of a now horizontally integrated media system, it remains the site of the largest revenues according to the 2000 financial reports of TimeWarner, Disney, NewsCorp, and Viacom, (30%, 24%, 27%, and 36% respectively). This should not be taken lightly. That is, the transnational corporations’ contribution to a particularly corporate and dominant discourse of globalization can find its largest voice in the basket where the media conglomerates keep most of their eggs.[5] What is important to stress is that the political economy of the entertainment industry is, to use Michel Foucault’s phrase, an indispensable corollary to the cultural logic of globalization disseminated to the broader public.

More so, critical scholarship must now move beyond analyses of movies whose narratives do little to mask their affirmation of the imperial enterprise—movies like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1984), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *The Jungle Book* (1942), *Passage to India* (1984), and the Columbus films are popular examples[6]—and begin to interrogate those cinematic narratives which sublimate vital dimensions of an imperialist logic. Are we to read the 1998 blockbuster *You’ve Got Mail* (its title has globalization written all over it) as an apolitical, non-imperial fiction simply because there are no “otherized peoples” in the film? Or, should we read it as an imperial fiction par excellence because it has normalized affluence to such a degree that we no longer need to acknowledge the fruits of imperialism that the characters have inherited? Meg Ryan’s character lives in a trendy 1,200 square foot apartment on the upper West-side (something only the wealthy can afford), and the narrative centers upon a budding relationship which grows when a national bookstore chain runs a local store out of business. This is the sublimated discourse of globalization of which a post-Vietnam U.S. public remains the primary audience; a public who would only cautiously admit that being the world’s only remaining superpower shares functional similarities to being a global Empire; an audience who firmly believes in the rhetoric of democracy and freedom and imagines their global role as one in opposition to imperialism; the first audience who must be aggressively—yet indirectly—reassured that an asymmetric model of globalization is indeed a worthy mission.[7]

American Beauty (1999)

If one were to accept a majority of critical responses to Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty*, then one might be left with the idea that the film is a poignant, hard-hitting attack on the superficiality of suburban life. That the prestigious Motion Picture Academy awarded it the prized Oscar for best motion picture should clue the viewer into the existence of a very different sub-narrative. Yet, a majority of the critical reviews have targeted the film’s conventional depiction of the “suburban labyrinth of bickering husbands and wives” (Gordineir 129). The *Washington Post* calls it “a scalding satire of the suburban myth” (Kempley

C1). It's a movie about the "dark underbelly" of "suburban madness" (Romney 46); it is a "hoary cliché of suburban soullessness" (West 49); it shows middle-class America as a "plastic prison" (Glieberman 49); The Economist argues that "the film simply recycles a view of the suburbs—that they are vortexes of tedium and alienation" (36); and Cineaste says it is a movie which aims "to skewer vulgar manifestations of status and rampant materialism" (Arthur 51) that plague suburbia. Unlike these reviews, I see two images of American affluence in *Beauty*. The first is its "humanitarian" implication: excessive materialism and over-consumption is empty and bad. The other is its "imperial" thrust: affluence is common, pre-ordained, and requires no recognition or responsibility to the history and current practices of globalization that leave the U.S. consuming over forty percent of the world's resources. That is, we should not mistake the film's superficial critique of suburban sprawl as a critique of global capitalist sprawl.

At one level, *Beauty* plays off an image of flat, empty materialism (and the "beauty" that several characters find in the now-famous image of an empty, floating shopping bag clearly illustrate the operational logic of an imperialism that pretends it is something other than imperialism). The film's first image is grainy video of a young girl—made pale and unalive by the pasty-tint of the video—speaking to her boyfriend/the camera, asking him/us to kill her father. Video images in film can operate to create a sense of the "real" (we all use video cameras to capture moments of our own real lives) at the same time invoking superficiality and flatness. The poor image quality of video always calls attention to itself as a re-construction of reality, especially when contrasted to the clarity and depth of the celluloid image. The pasty-video image then cuts to the blood-red title, "American Beauty," creating an immediate sense of ideological and visual irony. This tension is furthered in the following cut, which brings us to an overhead view of a nondescript suburban street. We hear the voice-over of our suburban hero, a 1990's Willy Lowman: "In a year I'll be dead. . . . But in a way, I'm dead already." The opening sequence, from wasting-a-life, to title, to waste-land, to a pronouncement of the living death that is suburbia, invites the U.S. audience to critique the emptiness that is their affluence.

But this critique is short-lived. The suburban hero, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey)—through whose eyes we see the world—finds most of life's gratification in moments of self-gratification. Almost immediately, we see Lester masturbating in the shower, with his/our voice-over subconscious explaining "This is the highlight of my day. It's all down hill from here." His sexual obsession with his daughter's under-aged friend, Angela (Mena Suvari), becomes the central desire and drive furthering the film's plot. He quits his job, buys his dream car, starts pumping weights, obsesses over his body, and begins smoking high-grade, genetically altered pot. In one of his cathartic epiphanies, he confronts his wife, Carolyn (Annette Benning), saying "This hasn't been a marriage for years, but you were happy as long as I kept my mouth shut. Well guess what? I've changed. And the new me whacks off when he feels horny." In a misleading critique of suburbia, the film presents an image of freedom-from-soulless-materialism that can be achieved through the self-gratification which defines Western consumption and materialism.

This ambiguity in *American Beauty* entices the U.S. audience to despise the materiality that informs their suburban angst while indirectly asking them to accept a "norm" of American wealth that allows our everyday-Joe-protagonist to afford \$2,000-a-bag pot. In the face of unemployment, the plot conveniently lets Lester blackmail his employer for a full year's salary and adopt the lifestyle of the self-sufficient. Has unemployment ever been so rewarding? His financial prosperity, we are led to believe, comes from this moment of ingenuity, and not from the history of exploitation, slavery, racism, and imperialism that has made him—as an affluent white, middle-class male—the beneficiary of historical relations of domination. And yet we are invited to sympathize with Lester-as-victim. This dual narrative in *American Beauty*—hate your consumerism, feel no guilt for your consumerism—parallels Liebes and Katz's claims about the television series *Dallas*'s overseas reception. They argue that, "Indeed, a clue to the pervasiveness of American programs overseas may lie in their 'openness' to negotiation" (4), and that in the context of viewing *Dallas*, there is both the "viewers' moral repudiation of *Dallas*'s worldly success and the notion that it is what everyone dreams of" (54). The same "openness" operates in *American Beauty*. The film provides a critique of the materialistic suburban lifestyle that does not disrupt the logic of globalcentrism benefitting the U.S. audience.

Gary Hentzi insists that *Beauty's* morose depiction of suburban materialism is nothing new in Hollywood. But he also finds irony in the film's image of suburban barrenness and the social complacency of the film's real suburban viewers.

The suburbs have been so frequently ridiculed on the score of crass materialism and abject conformity over the past 50 years that it is a wonder their residents do not rise up, wielding hedge trimmers and pruning shears, to exact revenge on their metropolitan tormentors. At the very least, it should be obvious that a film has to do more than work over such hackneyed themes to command our attention. (46)

Unlike Hentzi, my analysis illustrates that Mendes' film does more than just ridicule suburbia. While barefaced imperial narratives pit, according to Abdul JanMohamed, "civilized societies against the barbaric aberrations of an Other" (91), contemporary fictions of globalization aimed at the affluent exonerate the beneficiaries from any guilt associated with imperialism by reassuring them that their wealth, although soulless, is pre-ordained. The "backs of the other" on which the colonizer garners his wealth and power are no longer a necessary visual and symbolic part of the imperial fiction. This signifies a cultural difference between traditional manifestations of colonialism that inculcate an entire nation into the project (because it is often carried out in the name of nationalism) and transnational capitalism (which is carried out by "private" corporations whose actions do not openly draw in the U.S. consumer as an accomplice). Hollywood's suburban audience will not rise up against their tormentors because the logic that fuels metropole/suburbia, center/margin, and the unbalanced dialectic of globalization seemingly traps the Western audience: at one moment rendering them a victim of their own materialism and excess, at the same moment enticing them with the spectacle of nice homes and cars, and all the while asking them to ignore how the imbalance comes about. This narrative mechanism indirectly addresses the asymmetry in global resources by offering the possibility of "wealth among seemingly everyday American characters" (Horn 48).

Aside from glorifying and then normalizing economic prosperity, films like *American Beauty* downplay the scope of a corporate logic aimed at profiting from local and global exploitations. Paul Arthur explains that movies like *Beauty*, "rather than attack[ing] the gospel according to Dow Jones, . . . summon the shopworn ancillary proxies of suburban ennui, the success myth, and heedless consumerism" (51). Clearly, Lester Burnham's tragic downfall is spurred on by his being fired from a cookie-cutter job in a cookie-cutter office where he sells advertisements. But the movie allows the audience to revel in Lester's unlikely grip of power over the company. He quits his job, explaining that he will no longer be "a whore for the advertising industry. I'm just an ordinary guy with nothin' to lose." Of course he doesn't lose anything. He gets a year's salary and the freedom to do whatever he wants. Instead of allowing the narrative to illustrate a corporate disregard for the average citizen in the name of higher profits, Lester leaves the office as the victor, and the black-mailed company becomes the victim. In turn, the film distinctly frames Lester's demise as the vicious cultural effect of a soulless suburbia, the infidelity of his unstable wife, his homo-phobic/sexual Nazi neighbor, and what Sam Mendes along with scriptwriter Allan Ball (1999) jokingly term the "joint of destiny" outside of the Realtors' convention.

American Beauty, unlike the reliance upon the frontier myth in the post-WWII Western film, never turns its lens away from the confines of suburbia. Certainly, it can be argued that the film's story revolves around several suburban families, and as such, taking the viewer beyond suburbia would be insignificant to the development of the story. But I don't want to let the absence of the world beyond suburbia slip away as somehow insignificant. Frantz Fanon's indictment of the imperial logic, *Wretched of the Earth*, insists that "Europe is literally the creation of the Third World" (102). Whether or not Manichean dualities surface in a particular representation or product of the imperial center, the center cannot be imagined distinct from its connections to, in the words of Aimé Césaire, "forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, [and] contempt" (42) out of which the imperial center is partly constituted. To dismiss the nature of these interconnections when analyzing a cultural artifact requires an aggressive de-contextualization of the narrative and a disregard for the breadth of a particular discourse. I do not want to imply that *Beauty's* neglect of the world beyond the suburb unproblematically mirrors the colonial context of which Fanon and Césaire were writing. But such an absence, in the context of an imbalanced global politic, is not innocent; it illustrates that our contemporary fictions no longer take as their central task the need to project "empty" lands in need of civilization and "dark

continents" waiting for enlightenment. This shift in cultural imaginings implies two significant issues about the U.S. and globalization at the turn of the millennium. First, there is no longer a frontier.[8] Secondly, by downplaying the frontier myth and turning the gaze away from those spaces beyond the suburb, the real material relations informing globalcentrism are conveniently silenced.

More specifically, *American Beauty* sublimates the logic of those earlier imperial narratives and transcodes their manicheisms onto contemporary contexts. In *American Beauty*, the irrationality of the Other presents itself as an unstable wife who drives around town with a 9mm on her passenger seat chanting the mantra "I refuse to be a victim." The barbaric Other is re-cast as an unhinged homophobic gay man, who beats his son and harbors quiet Nazi sympathies. Against this backdrop, Lester appears the epitome of Enlightened rationality. It is not by accident that the subjective and narrative center of the film is white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male: a narrative that mirrors, as one example, the current international division of labor along racial and gender polarities. *Beauty* substitutes the unconquered frontier with a literal virgin/eve as the colonizer's goal. In fact, the moral problematic developed by the narrative revolves around Lester's fetish for the underage Angela. But here, too, our hero appears innocent. The movie's narrative has Angela trick Lester into thinking she is sexually experienced; the film has Angela desire Lester's conquest in a sadistic reworking of Kipling's "white man's burden." But Lester (in this instance, a dominant male on the verge of committing statutory rape) nobly refuses to "take her" once he knows she is a virgin. It paints the conqueror with a wash of humanitarianism; as someone who refuses to continue his exploitation because of his inherent altruism; a white man's benevolence that suburbia has suppressed. In a narrative shift that exonerates Lester and the audience, we are reassured that he/we would never take advantage of other people(s). At this moment in the film, the audience is offered a dual innocence—Angela's sexual innocence and Lester's ethical innocence—that overtly sidesteps the power relationship that drives their obsession with each other. Lester's redemption is narratively manifest in a recognition of Angela's "innocence"; an innocence which is transferred, by what can only be osmosis, to Lester: a man at peace with the world, staring at a black-and-white photo of his family, reminiscing about a lost history, completely unaware that almost everyone else intends to kill him; a bullet in the head he never saw coming.

Just as Lester is redeemed by the contradictory confluence of Enlightenment and innocence, so too is the U.S. audience. If anti-imperialist, third cinema is characterized by an esthetic of hunger and tropes of underdevelopment (Shohat & Stam, 1994), then normalizing the luxury of developed countries in cinematic images is particular to the discourse of globalcentrism. John Horn notes this trend.

[A] luxurious lifestyle is shaping the cinematic aesthetic, creating in the current movie season an epidemic of wealth among seemingly everyday American characters that has moved from the vaguely annoying to the nearly pornographic. Only a fraction of the 35- millimeter money is central to the movie plots Filmmakers drown their characters in spectacular real estate, designer clothes and swank cars, and still pretend that who we see on screen are people next door. (48)

In the pre-war Hollywood musicals of Busby Berkeley, the luxurious was never assumed to be the status quo of middle-class America. The acknowledgment of these earlier films' position as fantasy partly provided depression-era Hollywood with its nickname as the "dream machine." But the distinction remains that the discourse of globalization must reassure the U.S. audience of the common-place nature of their own relatively uncommon position in an unbalanced global dialectic. *American Beauty* superficially challenges this relative position of Western affluence: it is the excess provided by suburbia that leaves Lester empty and "dead already." At one point, he even announces his distaste for the materialist culture to Carolyn: "This isn't life. This is stuff. And its become more important to you than living!"

But the film very neatly describes the world of excessive wealth with a language of "ordinary"ness. Lester tells his supervisor that he is just "an ordinary guy with nothin' to lose." The 16 year old Angela explains to Lester's daughter (as they drive around suburbia in a convertible BMW), that "If people I don't even know look at me and want to fuck me, I really have a shot at being a model. Which is great. Because there's nothing worse in life than being ordinary." In fact, this becomes Angela's mantra. Later in the film, she remarks, "Ordinary I don't think there's anything worse than being ordinary." And

Ricky (Wes Bentley) knows how to bring her down: “you’re ordinary, and you know it.” Satisfying a dual purpose in the discourse of globalization, *American Beauty* pretends to critique a notion of the “ordinary” which it must first invent—as Mercedes SUVs, BMWs, classic cars, white picket fences lined with manicured roses, color-coordinated pruning gear, large homes, and the luxury of working at McDonalds because you want, as does Lester, “the least possible amount of responsibility.” An interesting statement in the context of McGlobalization.

Gladiator (2000)

The 2001 Academy Awards invoked images of globalization from the first moment. Anthony Giddens’ claim that globalization is marked by a “separation of time and space” (16) and the ability to cross previously impermeable boundaries is right at home in the Awards’ opening scenes of film, broadcast television, and radio signals as they careen through outer-space at galactic time. And while Giddens argues that globalization indicates the “evaporating of the privileged position of the West” (52), I couldn’t help but notice that all of the movie-clips floating through the Academy’s televised solar system are Hollywood remnants. The Awards then take us to a live feed from the International Space Station, where, at over 18,000 miles per hour and more than 230 miles above the earth, the space station crew introduce host Steve Martin (who wastes no time in telling the audience that the Awards are being watched by over 800 million viewers world-wide).

The film this faux globally-minded Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences chose as the most esteemed cinematic artifact from 2000 was *Gladiator*: directed by British-born Ridley Scott, starring New Zealander Russell Crowe (as Maximus), Denmark-born Connie Nielsen (as Lucilla), and filmed in a re-created Rome on the island of Malta and in a computer. Of course, it’s owned and distributed by Hollywood giants Dreamworks and Universal. I think it’s interesting to place the narrative of *Gladiator* in the context of its rival Best Picture nominees and ask ourselves what it offers us as a cultural artifact the others do not. Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was, by some counts, expected to take the Oscar. But to award the Oscar to a foreign film would certainly risk exposing the Holly-centrism in the existence of a separate Best Foreign Film category. Independent filmmaker Steven Soderbergh brought two films to the Best Picture table: *Traffic* tackles America’s War on Drugs by foregrounding the hypocrisies of those who wage it; *Erin Brokovich* goes after the capitalist injustice of profit over people, and follows Brokovich as she, according to the tagline, brings “a huge corporation to its knees.” Lastly is Swedish-born Lasse Halström’s *Chocolat*, about a woman and daughter who open a chocolate shop and shake up a rigidly moral community, ultimately reminding audiences that tolerance is always better than any form of intolerance. What does it say about a film industry that, at the height of a decade of unrivaled economic prosperity, bestows its greatest honor on a film which recreates the glory of Imperial Rome and the struggles of an entertainment industry (the gladiator system) unfairly driven by the whims of governments?

In a vein that parallels *American Beauty*, Scott’s *Gladiator* adorns an underlying logic of imperialism with a cloak of benevolence and humanitarianism. On the surface, *Gladiator* appears anti-imperial, anti-cosmopolitan, and its narrative revolves around a social contest for political democracy. But it never loses the imperial subtext of barbaric other-ness, of lightness pit against darkness, and of the grandiose, self-flattering spectacle that defines empire. It has inherited these tropes from its earlier Roman epic predecessors. In fact, most reviews of *Gladiator* position it in terms of genre, invoking such sand-and-sandal greats as Mervin LeRoy’s *Quo Vadis?* (1951), William Wyler’s *Ben Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960), and Anthony Mann’s *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). Until halfway through the 1960s, the “ancient historical/biblical/war spectacle represented one of the mainstays of world cinema” (McCarthy 27).

The imperial epic has been dormant for over 35 years (the political assassinations of the ‘60s and the Vietnam War certainly created a problematic perception about the virtue of an imperial project for Americans), and *Gladiator* can only surface and triumph at this particular historical and political moment. One Time review speculates that “there’s a magnetic pull of audiences to Roman Empire epics—stories about palace sex, political backstabbing and violent raids are as today as the Clinton administration” (83). Such reviews are as diversionary as Monica-gate, and they leave by the wayside any ideological analysis

of the political and economic expansionism that defines and informs the possibility of Empire. Furthermore, surface critiques will seldom ask why such a narrative thrives in America's culture at this particular historical moment. Nicholas Nicasro notes how the Roman epic alters slightly with each movie-going generation.

In the heyday of the silent epics, all ancient cities looked like Sodom and existed only to fall. At the dawn of wide-screen films, Rome had the broad, uncluttered roadways and suburban villas dreamt of by post-war bread-winners. By the early sixties, Stanley Kubrick presented the definitive Cold War Rome . . . [But] partly because of moviegoer's changing tastes and partly because of production costs, nobody even attempted an ancient spectacle on the scale of Anthony Mann's 1964 *The Fall of the Roman Empire* until Scott's new film. (70)

What impresses Nicasro, an archaeologist, about *Gladiator* is the film's "respect for setting and subject" (70). Giving due credit to the ability of computer-generated-imaging to re-construct Rome before our eyes, the archaeologist also bemoans how the film glamorizes "the army and the arena to the exclusion of every other aspect of Roman life" (71). Nicasro wants Hollywood to reanimate the baths, the law courts, the gardens, and the tombs. It is culturally significant, however, that Scott reanimated the army and arena while leaving the rest of Rome in imaginative ruin. A Roman epic which fuses war and spectacle finds a safe home in a post-CNN Gulf War generation whose own affluence and global might are partly the result of a Cold War conquest.

Gladiator is the story of a Roman military general, Maximus (Russell Crowe) who is asked by the dying Emperor, Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) to become Rome's new ruler in order to gradually turn the Empire into a republic. Of course, the Emperor's son, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) not only believes that he, not Maximus, should become Rome's new ruler, but that the citizens need a "father" in the form of a dictator. Commodus kills his father, has Maximus' family slaughtered, and, he believes, has Maximus assassinated. However, Maximus is sold into slavery, becomes a famous gladiator, and embarks upon a personal mission to fulfill "the wish of a dying man." In a culturally important way, the movie represents Maximus as anti-cosmopolitan at the same time it narratively draws him into the contest between national/cultural imperialism and freedom. From the beginning, Maximus longs to return to the countryside. After the movie's opening battle sequence, in which Maximus successfully conquers and annexes Germania, a celebration finds him discussing with several senators his desire to return to his farm in Spain.

Quintus:

Back to the barracks, or to Rome?

Maximus:

Home. Wife. Son. The harvest.

Quintus:

Maximus the Farmer. I still have difficulty imagining that.

Maximus:

You know dirt cleans off a lot easier than blood, Quintus.

The wit of Maximus' reply carries with it a real sense of the oppressive conquest that walks with empire, and it also codifies our central character and hero as non-cosmopolitan and humanitarian. But the narrative quickly dismisses any discussion of imperialism and empire by introducing the conflict facing

Rome: will Maximus, who has the army behind him, stand in favor of “Emperor or Senate?” This contest attempts to introduce an anti-imperial tone in a blatantly imperial setting. Whether a single, rogue dictator should run a country or whether it should be run by the people certainly resonates as a central cultural myth for a U.S. audience.

Maximus conveniently bows out of having to answer such a question by insisting he return to Spain. And moments later, the Emperor asks to speak privately with Maximus: he wants Maximus to become Rome’s new ruler. Maximus resists, invoking images of his rural, quiet life. The film’s narrative reassures the audience that such a (local) concession to the (global) empire is a sacrifice in the name of a greater freedom. Marcus, collapsing the distinction between dictator and democracy, insists Maximus become Emperor and “give power back to the people of Rome.” The irony of giving the most powerful military leader the autonomy of a dictator, and then ask that he surrender (a difficult task for military leaders) that same power didn’t make it past many critics. Kenneth Auchincloss writes, “Did Marcus Aurelius intend to restore the republic? No. However saintly (or tipsy), emperors didn’t do that sort of thing” (71). Stuart Klawans cynically insists that the movie turns Maximus into “a man on a white horse . . . who will restore Rome to democracy by becoming a dictator” (34). Placing *Gladiator* in the context of other summer blockbusters like *Mission: Impossible 2* and *Titan A.E.*, it becomes apparent that many Hollywood films rearticulate a similar cultural narrative.

Each of the films mentioned offers a simplistic variation on the Jesus story. But they concern saviors who come with weapons to redeem the world from dictatorial oppressors Yet none of these narratives of revolution convincingly installs a more egalitarian society after toppling its tyrant. The meek never inherit the earth In universes where the sole challenge to a sneering despot comes from slightly more enlightened fascists, blood is bound to spill. (Shargel 39)

A new imperial humanitarianism is marked precisely by a hollow critique of Empire, wherein peace and freedom are represented as the natural result of conquest. The introductory titles of *Gladiator* frame the narrative in just such a contradiction: the battle against Germania ends with “a Roman victory and the promise of peace throughout the Empire.” These titles are immediately followed by a stunning visual sequence that reinforces this myth. We see a close-up of a hand brushing across the wheat in a field. There is brown-golden tint to the image that helps establish a sense of calm and warmth. The wheat is ready for harvest, and this invokes a sense of sustenance and life. The image cuts to a medium close-up of Maximus, who is still and solemn against a vague background. And then we find ourselves in the cold, dark Germania battlefield—burnt and leveled to a wasteland. Sergei Eisenstein holds that the “nerve of cinema” (140) is in contrasting images, and the “degree of incongruence determines intensity of impression” (141). This model is useful for understanding the emotive force that evolves from juxtaposing the wheat field with a burnt forest: a contrast of light and dark, a contrast of warm and cold, a contrast of life and death, a contrast of freedom and domination; all cradled within a one-minute shot sequence.

Although this shot sequence is visually stunning, I am particularly interested in the ideological implications of such contrasts, noting how Eisenstein believes meaning arises “from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another” (141). *Gladiator*’s introductory sequence creates a narrative in which peace and conquest are organically bound together, and the fine line (literally, visually in this case) between prosperity and desolation is occupied by a military leader on the verge of victorious conquest. Even before this sequence, the titles inform the audience that peace throughout the empire can only be attained after conquering the “barbarian tribes” of Germania. And while Rome is the aggressor, attempting to annex Germania to the northern borders of its empire, “barbarian” helps to codify the Other as the assailant. Visually, the battle-scene between the Roman army and the Germanian barbarians emulates the trendy stylistic fast-cuts and washed-out color that Spielberg popularized in the introductory battle scene in his 1998 blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan* (a style Klawans has appropriately coined “slo-mo, strobe-mo, and jitter-mo” (34)). But the invocation of Germania ties the two films ideologically as well; one cannot easily justify military conquest in the name of Empire by invoking Vietnam for the U.S. audience.

Later, when Maximus is captured by slave-traders, he is taken to a barren outpost on the margins of the

Empire. We never get such barren landscapes inside of the Empire. Zucchabar is the “Hollywood version of the Middle East: a place of mud-brick architecture and ululation, where stoop-shouldered, burnoose-clad merchants pass the days in sibilant larceny” (Klawans 34). It is not ironic that in Scott’s Middle East, and not in Rome itself, our hero is first enslaved and forced to brutally fight his comrades to the death. It is either self-fulfilling prophecy or imperial logic that Maximus, just twenty minutes earlier, was telling Marcus “I have seen much of the rest of the world; it is brutal and cruel and dark. Rome is the light.” But the most stunning visual juxtapositions of the darkness of barbarism and the light of civilization come when the gladiators ready themselves, chained in the darkness beneath the grandiosity of the Colosseum, and emerge into its light, the light of Rome, of violence-as-spectacle, of war-as-simulacra (Carthage or Kuwait?), and of conquest for profit; all masquerading as a contest for democracy.

While *Gladiator* seldom deviates from the imperial tropes and genre conventions that inform its earlier predecessors, it differentiates itself by leaving out “the Judeo-Christian angle so common to the genre in the 50’s” (McCarthy 27). While this certainly will not stand out to a new generation of moviegoers who have no historical context of *Gladiator*’s genre, the shift indicates a political transition which is crucial to a new image of imperial humanitarianism. Nicasastro asks, “If *Gladiator* is a modern parable, what are we to make of the conspicuous absence of Christianity in the film” (71)? While several critics (Klawans, 2000; McCarthy, 2000; Nicasastro, 2000) place *Gladiator* in a historical context of genre and notice this absence, Nicasastro is the only one to wager a possible reason: Romans no longer need to “turn into Christians” (71) in order to remain interesting to an American audience. On the surface, this lack indicates a shift in the moral center of American culture. But there is an imperial political function in just such an absence: it reaffirms the logic of Empire.

A brief comparison to one of *Gladiator*’s predecessors elaborates this idea. Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960) follows a loosely similar plot. *Spartacus* (Kirk Douglas) is a slave who is sold to become a gladiator, revolts against his owner, and leads his fellow slaves into rebellion. *Spartacus*’ revolt, as in *Gladiator*, will have an impact on Rome, where two senators (one a republican, the other a militarist) are engaged in a contest about the political future of Rome. Unlike *Gladiator*, Kubrick’s film invokes Christianity in its very first moment. The opening scene is an overhead shot of a Roman centurion who stands guard over a rocky expanse of mountain barrenness, where lines of slaves mine the rock under a grueling sun in order to provide the materials for Rome’s great architecture. The story of *Spartacus* is ideologically coded and framed by the voice-over of a narrator.

In the last century before the birth of the new faith called Christianity, which was destined to overthrow the pagan tyranny of Rome and bring about a new society, the Roman republic stood at the very center of the civilized world. “Of all things fairest,” sang the poet, “first among cities and home among Gods is Rome.” And even at the zenith of her pride and power, the republic lay fatally stricken with a disease called human slavery.

Two things warrant our attention in the comparison. *Spartacus* locates slavery at the very heart of the Roman empire; indeed, slavery is one of the conditions of possibility of Empire. In Scott’s film, slavery is banished to the margins of the empire, and flourishes in a barbaric Middle East. It comes to Rome in the form of gladiatorial contests and only when the tyrannical despot Commodus gains power. Second, in *Spartacus* and the other Roman epics up until the mid ‘60s, Christianity was invoked as the humanitarian successor to “the pagan tyranny of Rome.” Why then, in Hollywood’s modern revival of the Roman epic, is Christianity not waiting in the wings to enter and save Rome from its gluttony? Simple. At the height of America’s longest stretch of political, economic, and global prosperity and influence, why slander the idea of Empire?

Gladiator reaffirms for the American audience that Empire is not inherently, structurally bad. It does not necessarily need to fall. In fact, the film’s visual glorification of the Roman empire and the Colosseum, with the aid of CGI, is a spectacled amalgamation and fulfillment of both *Triumph of the Will* (1934) and *Olympia* (1938) of which Leni Riefenstahl could only have imagined. Such images idealize economic and political prosperity. Even Maximus’ desire to return to his estate in Spain (I know he insists it’s a “farm,” but only the aristocratic few could own land during the Roman empire), which he solemnly describes to Marcus as “simple, really,” is filmed as an idyllic memory comprised of a Mediterranean

country home with “pink stone,” a “kitchen garden,” “herbs,” a white, picket “gate,” “apples” growing in the orchard, “grapes” on one side of the house, “olive trees” on the other, and “wild ponies” running about. Where Riefenstahl will envy Scott’s reanimation of Rome, Martha Stewart can but envy his invocation of the blatantly affluent “simple life.”

Conclusion

If the genre of the Western and its popularity during post-World War II U.S. expansionism is contextually pre-imperial (with vast, uncluttered landscapes that stand ready for human civilization and U.S. expansionism), then the naturalized images of prosperity in a film like *American Beauty* and the grandiosity of the Roman landscape in *Gladiator* illustrate the Western’s fulfillment. These films carry a surface message offering a soft, or faux critique of imperialism. Yet in the same moment, their narratives and spectacle offer up and reaffirm the United States’s contemporary location as economic, political, and cultural victors on the global stage. This contradiction is the perfect coherency of an imperialism masquerading as humanitarianism.

I want to clarify several substantial theoretical implications that this project begins to address concerning the discourse of globalization and the dominant film industry’s situating of the U.S. audience within this discourse. The latter element of this focus deviates significantly from more traditional approaches to theorizing globalization and culture (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Liebes and Katz, 1993) that train their eye on the ways in which non-Western, local cultures negotiate the forces and flows of Western culture (its artifacts, practices, ideologies) and their own lived experience.

I am interested in the image of globalization that is distributed to the U.S. audience, and whether this image is indicative of an imperial globalization process favoring connections of access or globalization as mutual interdependency and economic and cultural parity. These movies indirectly address the issue of globalization by employing its underlying logics in the construction of their narratives. If we are to accept Herbert Schiller’s analysis that, although international cultural flows are undergoing transformation, “American cultural domination remains forceful in a rapidly changing international power scene” (327), then understanding how the powerful U.S. audience consents to this Imperial form of globalization is indeed significant. In the context of culture, Peter Berger understands globalization as a process of challenges and responses: “The challenge is supposed to come from an emerging global culture, most of it Western and indeed American provenance,” while the response from the local cultures is “on a scale between acceptance and rejection” (2). In the realm of economics, George Soros sees globalization as “the development of global financial markets, the growth of transnational corporations, and their increasing domination over national economies” (1), a process resulting from the elected Reagan and Thatcher governments who actively sought to reduce state interference with the flow of capital. If both the cultural and economic shape of globalization is now influenced unequally by the West and the United States, then the circulation of the dominant discourse on globalization within and targeting the U.S. audience will not ignore this fact. Instead, it will overtly or indirectly address the inequality of the process in its cultural images, narratives, and practices. Whether these condemn or condone the emerging global imbalance is text/practice specific. What each cultural articulation cannot do is outright remove itself from within the broader discourse of globalization.

This is certainly not to imply that either the discourse or process of globalization is totalizing or homogenous. Appadurai notes, “the globalization of culture is not the same as its homogenization” and that “lives today are as much acts of projection and imagination as they are enactments of known scripts and predictable outcomes” (42, 61). But when we recognize that the major vehicles for images of culture and ideology are the global media (of which, I noted earlier, U.S. film and the U.S. audience remain the site of the largest revenues), one must come to terms with the fact that, for the time being, the first site of cultural negotiation with an imperial-style discourse of globalization is enacted in the movie gigaplexes and homes of the U.S. audience. In the context of globalization, this media moment embodies a coming-to-terms with the “unbalanced dialectic” (to re-invoke Tomlinson’s phrase) between the U.S. audience (its armaments, economic interests, cultural products, and language hegemonies) and the rest of the world. *American Beauty*, *Gladiator*, and most widely circulated Hollywood blockbusters (from *Cast Away* (2000) to *Black Hawk Down* (2001)) offer an articulation of the imperial tendency in the current

process of globalization. Gramsci's understanding of hegemony works well, I think, in describing the American audience's acceptance of the asymmetrical exchange and consumption of global resources, and the quantitative imbalance of global media, news, information, entertainment, and economic and cultural flows. The idea of hegemony resists homogeneity in favor of a plurality of cultural negotiations. But it also helps to illustrate the ways in which the global media industry invites the U.S. audience (through images that reaffirm affluence, the might of conquest, and the right to Empire) to consent to the residual logic of imperialism in the current processes of globalization.

It is important to recognize that traditional European discourses of Empire, the classic analysis of which is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), regularly cloaked the barbarity of the colonial enterprise (exploitation, slavery, expansion) in symbols of benevolence (education, civilization, salvation). *American Beauty* and *Gladiator* mark a striking deviation from this history of representation. That is, unlike the earlier imperial discourses which rely on the cultural construction of a uncivilized, barbaric Other, these current films are part of a discourse which is even more "Self-centric." They do not invoke the specter of an exotic, non-Western Other which necessarily needs the European (and intervention) to be made whole. In both *American Beauty* and *Gladiator*, the critique of the soul-less, barbaric, un-democratic, un-civilized emptiness of geography and mind is turned upon the imperial Self. It is our own suburban wasteland (in *Beauty*) and un-civilized barbarism (in *Gladiator*) that requires humanitarian intervention. These are criticisms often directed at the current model of globalization. Yet, the solution each movie offers to these deficiencies is the same as it was in the traditional colonial discourse: self-gratification and excess (in *Beauty*) and the inherent glory of an expansionist Empire (in *Gladiator*). Instead of invoking the disfunction of the Other in an attempt to justify Empire, these two movies mark a trend which invokes the disfunction of Empire's own logic in order to ultimately restore the necessity of those same logics. That is, these movies are a site of cultural negotiation, but the contest of what should be America's position in the context of globalization is first enacted, worked through, and neutralized on the screen.

It is important, I think, to resist reading the Academy Award winners as artistic and scientific achievements (which is the claim of the Academy) existing outside of a global interconnectedness. Such a tendency results in weak critical interrogations of the films, defining them as "artfully and exuberantly constructed escapism" (Travers 82). Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner offer a more productive approach to thinking about the pedagogical role of film.

The representation of the social world is political and [the] choice of modes of representation instantiates differing political positions toward it. Indeed, every camera position, every scene composition, every editing decision, and every narrative choice involves a representational strategy that embeds various interests and desires. (274)

It is from this critical angle that we can see the supportive role that Hollywood works like *Gladiator* and *American Beauty* play in ratifying an unbalanced global dialectic: a dialectic that normalizes affluence at the same time encouraging a type of "imaginative poverty" concerning America's global influence; a dialectic that finds Kenneth Cole's version of the Roman sandal worn by Lucilla in a movie about freedom-over-oppression suddenly out of stock. *American Beauty* and *Gladiator* offer a reading of America's location in the world, and it is no small matter that they are awarded Hollywood's highest honor. These works are vehicles of culture, and for an economically prosperous industry and audience they are vehicles of affluence, operating to either marginalize or normalize the global political and economic asymmetry marking this historical moment.

Notes

[1]. In the case of *American Beauty*, it grossed more in the U.S. during the one week following its success at the Academy Awards (approximately 116.658 million) than it did during the entire first month (and more) of its theatrical run. It went from playing on only 7 screens nation-wide during the middle of February 2000 to playing on an astonishing 1990 screens the weekend after its Best Picture win at the Academy Awards in March 2000. *Gladiator* follows a similar trend, playing on only 12 screens the weekend before its Best Picture win in March 2001 to 577 screens the weekend following its Academy success.

[2]. One need only look at the National Geographic magazine (December 2001) map of world-wide teledensity and fiber-optic submarine cable "Connecting the Planet" to note this influence. Color coding (red=highest teledensity and white=least teledensity) leaves the U.S. looking like a blood-red heart with fiber-optic vessels leading out from it (or coming into it) to/from the entire globe (77-78).

[3]. Tomlinson's analysis of Mark Phillip's BBC documentary *Mange Tout* (1997) deals specifically with how differently globalization constructs the consumer and producer of a commodity. "One of the revealing aspects of this film was the relative levels of information about, or ignorance of, the other displayed by the producers and consumers" (136). Tomlinson draws out not only the non-reciprocal undercurrent of globalization, but the "imaginative poverty" (136) of the general population who operate as beneficiaries within a global network.

[4]. This message is the centerpiece of NewsCorp's homepage. See www.newscorp.com (accessed 19 February 2000). The full heading reads: "Producing and distributing the most compelling news, information, and entertainment to the farthest reaches of the Globe." For the time being at least, the critical scholar can find some reassurance in NewsCorp's admission that news, information, and entertainment remain separate entities.

[5]. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam find a similar relationship between the economics of imperialism and the proliferation of cinema as a cultural past-time. They write, "The most prolific film-producing countries of the silent period—Britain, France, the U.S., Germany—also 'happened' to be among the leading imperialist countries, in whose clear interest it was to laud the colonial enterprise" (100). The importance of the imperial project, they suggest, became disseminated to the broader public precisely through the popular fictions of the cinema.

[6]. Here I am referring to Shohat and Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, which is an extremely important, thorough historical analysis of Imperial narratives and tropes in popular Hollywood cinema. While I am indebted to the ideas forwarded in their text, it is important, I think, to now apply the methodology of their project to films which do not fall within the traditional boundaries of Imperial fictions (i.e. westerns, narratives of discovery, conquest films, etc.).

[7]. The U.S. audience is the first consumer of the global media conglomerates ideology of globalization. NewsCorp's interest in becoming a global distributor of news and entertainment must be weighed against the overwhelming consumption of NewsCorp's products by the U.S.. According to their 2000 Financial Report, the American audience accounts for nearly 75% of all of NewsCorp's yearly revenue. Disney's goal in 1995 to "expand it's non-US share of revenues from 23 percent in 1995 to 50 percent by 2000" (Herman and McChesney, 81) never materialized. Their 2000 fiscal report still posits 82% of their revenue in the United States.

[8]. More precisely, the frontier has escaped this world and is now embodied as a galactic frontier. And this new frontier is also imagined as needing colonization and control, as exemplified by the continued success of the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* series, and movies like *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *Mission to Mars* (1999), the latter films imagining space as a threat because it's outside American control.

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