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## INTRO:

**Intro music plays for a bit before intro begins**

Hello, gladiators! Welcome to The Roman Gladiator Podcast. I'm your host, Valentina.

With Pedro Pascal and Paul Mescal joining Gladiator 2, it's hard not to think the real fight might just be over who's the finest gladiator. (Spoiler alert: it's Pedro. Always Pedro.) But beneath the eye candy, there's something deeper going on, something worth pausing the sword fights for.

What does our obsession with bloody, brutal Roman warfare actually say about us? Why do these depictions of violence hit so hard, or maybe not hard enough?

To help unpack this, I'll be leaning on insights from a powerful piece by scholar Hannah-Marie Chidwick, titled "Sensational Violence: Brutality in Twenty-First-Century Cinematic Depictions of Roman Battles." It's part of the Brill Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Warfare on Film, and it dives deep into how modern media dramatizes ancient brutality, not just for shock value, but to reinforce certain cultural myths around masculinity, empire, and entertainment.

So today, we're not just talking about blood and blades, we're digging into why the camera lingers on that wound, and what that says about who we are as viewers in the 21st century.

## THE EVOLUTION OF VIOLENCE IN FILM

After Ridley Scott's Gladiator exploded onto the scene in the 2000s, filmmakers leaned into a more visceral, gritty form of storytelling. Gladiator didn't shy away from violence, but it framed brutality within a narrative of honor, valor, and psychological consequence. It struck a balance between cinematic grandeur and realistic combat.

***Audio Clip from Gladiator plays***:
→**Proximo:**"Do any of them fight? I got a match coming up."
→**Slave Trader:**"Some are good for fighting, others for dying. You need both I think."

That exchange reveals a dark, almost casual commodification of violence. Still, Gladiator offered more than gore, it meditated on mortality and heroism.

There is also a strong  emphasis on honor and valor especially stressed during times of battle.

***Audio Clip from Gladiator plays*:**

**Gladiator:** "Go and die with honor!"

But in later films, like *Centurion* and *The Eagle*, the tone shifts. As Chidwick points out, these movies present “gritty and ruthless” violence that strips away the romanticism. There’s less philosophical reflection, and more raw survival. In *Centurion*, for example, dialogue often takes a backseat to physicality, there’s a lot more grunting, close-up combat, and blood-soaked action. The violence isn’t a backdrop, it is the narrative itself.

## EXAMPLES OF GRAPHIC PORTRAYALS:

Now, let’s shift to how violence is portrayed in modern depictions of the Romans. As Chidwick points out, “violent acts constitute most of the two-minute publicity montage” in these films. And honestly, that makes sense. In a world without guns or advanced weaponry, physical strength and combat skill were everything. Your ability to survive, and even thrive, depended on how well you could fight. So, when filmmakers want to dramatize the brutality of Roman life, they naturally focus on hand-to-hand combat, blood-soaked battles, and raw displays of power. It’s a sort of visual shorthand for the era’s intensity and danger, and it helps modern audiences instantly grasp just how high the stakes were in that world.

Now, let's take a closer look at these two films. In *Centurion*, released in 2010, the action is chaotic and visceral. From the opening scenes, we’re thrust into frantic close-ups of violence, with blood and gore depicted graphically. This film invites the audiences to witness a battlefield that is more about survival than heroism.

In *The Eagle,* released in 2011, just one year later, we see a similarly grim depiction of ancient warfare. Critics have noted its thrilling yet brutal battle sequences that draw viewers into the muddy experience that is Roman combat.

The contrast is stark between these films and earlier epic representations. They break away from the glorified depictions of heroic battles to a more realistic portrayal of violence, focusing on its disturbing**, <u>less personal</u>** nature.

it’s honestly fascinating to see how modern films like *Gladiator 2,* the follow up of Gladiator, continue the cinematic staple of “somatic violence.” According to Chidwick in the study on the brutal depictions of Roman battles, “audiences have come to expect... brutality in portrayals of ancient battles”.

## BROADER CULTURAL MESSAGES:

So, what are the broader cultural messages these depictions convey? When we look at violence in these films, we need to examine how they reinforce ideals about war, masculinity, and heroism.

The films often channel a warrior ethos that emphasizes aggression and power, echoing Greek concepts of *timē*, the honor and respect that a warrior earns through acts of valor in battle. Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* romanticizes not just warfare but the very identities constructed around these military conquests.

***Audio from Gladiator:***

**Maximus:**"Strength and honor."

**Quintus:**"Strength and honor"

**General:**"Strength and honor."

These films feed into a larger narrative that glorifies militarism and colonialism, emphasizing the strength of the Roman army while often downplaying the humanity of their adversaries.

I also think violence wasn't just a part of Roman life, it was central to their cultural identity. It was, in many ways, the Roman ideal. You can really see this in the kinds of stories they told about themselves, especially in foundational texts like Virgil's *Aeneid* and Julius Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*.

Take the *Aeneid*. Virgil was crafting a national epic meant to define Roman values. And at the heart of it is Aeneas, a warrior who earns his place in history not through the typical routes of diplomacy or cleverness, but through sheer force and perseverance in war. The poem is absolutely filled with graphic, vivid battle scenes, and Aeneas himself is often praised for his ability to inflict violence in the name of duty and fate. Even when he kills Turnus at the end, it's not a moment of restraint or mercy, it's raw vengeance. Virgil presents this as righteous and even necessary, reinforcing the idea that violence, when tied to Roman ideals like honor and duty, is not just acceptable, it's noble.

Then you have Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, which aren't just historical records, but political propaganda. Caesar wrote them in the third person to make his brutal military campaigns seem objective and justified. He goes into detailed descriptions of his strategies, the number of enemies killed, and how he outsmarted or overpowered the Gallic tribes. He constantly emphasizes Roman superiority, not just in intellect or civilization, but in sheer military might. He portrays the Gauls as disorganized, emotional, and ultimately weak, everything the Romans prided themselves on **not** being. The underlying message is clear: Rome thrives because it conquers. And if you aren't the conqueror you're the conquered.

So, when we think about why violence is so prominent in modern portrayals of the Romans, it's not just about cinematic spectacle. It's also because violence was deeply ingrained in how the Romans saw themselves and how they wanted to be remembered. It was part of their mythology, their politics, and their sense of cultural pride.

It’s essential to think about how these portrayals reflect our understanding of history, and how we consume it. Chidwick emphasizes that “ultraviolence is not wholly physical, but can be understood to align with a Western colonialist, hegemonic male discourse”.

## PERCEPTIONS OF ON SCREEN VIOLENCE:

Now, let’s consider how audiences perceive and react to this on screen violence. Are viewers merely entertained, or do they feel disturbed?

The first scene of Gladiator *2* throws you straight into bloody battle, no introductions, no buildup, just an intense, all  out brawl. And honestly, I didn’t mind it. The internet’s already full of fan edits showing Pedro Pascal and Paul Mescal bloodied and fighting, and there’s something undeniably gripping about it. The raw violence and the beautiful heartthrobs fighting each other all bloody and smoldering like just automatically make it a fan favorite.

As Chidwick points out, “consuming spectacles of destruction is central to the most successful films in popular culture” and his demonstrates a growing appetite for graphic depictions of violence.

Especially if Pedro is involved Im watching it Im watching it-

*scratch noise and then elevator music

## FILM MAKING CHOICES:

But this brings up  an intriguing question.

Why do filmmakers often prioritize violent spectacles over STRICT historical accuracy? In an age of entertainment where “the audience governs the narrative,” movies tend to cater to expectations shaped by pop culture and also WALLETS. *Chaching sound

Not many people would head to the movies because a film is historically accurate because thats not a priority for the majority of the audience. Sometimes things need to be embellished to keep people entertained for 2 plus hours. It gives them a reason to spend money on gas, a movie ticket, and a large popcorn.

***AUDIO from Gladiator:***

**Maximus:** "Are you not entertained?! Are you not entertained?! Is this not why you are here?!"

I mean I could watch Pedro pascal staring at the camera for 24 hours, so the star studded cast definitely holds value even though you know Pedro is chilean I don't care when I sat down in

that reclining chair,  he was a Roman God to me , okay? And he was much to that to everyone else.

Historical consultants like Kathleen Coleman on *Gladiator* have sometimes found their expertise sidelined in favor of what audiences want. Chidwick emphasizes that the cultural and political consensus between filmmakers and viewers heavily influences film narratives. Essentially, this means studios opt for mesmerizing battle scenes that package violence as a spectacle rather than dwelling on historical fidelity.

And to be honest again  I personally don't mind as long as Pedro is on the screen its gonna be seen.

**CONCLUSION:**

So to conclude here, Roman war films like *Centurion* and *The Eagle* are more than just entertainment, they shape how we think about masculinity, heroism, and history itself. Like Caesar's *Commentarii* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, these stories frame violence as meaningful, even noble. By reflecting on what these narratives tell us, we better understand both the past and the values we project onto it today.

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Thank you for joining me today. Until next time!

**FADE OUT**