

## Spectacle, Oppression, and Resistance: Class Struggle in *Gladiator II* through Marxist Criticism

Felicia Jessica Kusen<sup>1</sup>, Filmorevo Jesse Lincoln Tatemba<sup>2</sup>, Jesslyn Quaneisha Lie<sup>3</sup>, Dominic Thomas Martin<sup>4</sup>, Aubrey Jemima Tambunan<sup>5</sup>, Kezia Jade Meizie Sabuin<sup>6</sup>

*English Literature: Literary Criticism*

*Boanerges: Makarios Education Journal*

**Email:** [felicia.jessica.kusen@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:felicia.jessica.kusen@sekolahmakarios.id), [filmorevo.jesse.tatemala@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:filmorevo.jesse.tatemala@sekolahmakarios.id),  
[jesslyn.quaneisha.lie@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:jesslyn.quaneisha.lie@sekolahmakarios.id), [dominic.thomas.martin@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:dominic.thomas.martin@sekolahmakarios.id),  
[aubrey.jemima.tambunan@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:aubrey.jemima.tambunan@sekolahmakarios.id), [kezia.meizie.sabuin@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:kezia.meizie.sabuin@sekolahmakarios.id)

### ABSTRACT

This article examines *Gladiator II* (2024) through the lens of Karl Marx's theory of class struggle. Using textual and thematic analysis, the study explores how the film portrays structural inequality, labor exploitation, and the emergence of resistance within ancient Roman society. The findings indicate three key results: **1)** the depiction of slavery and gladiatorial combat embodies Marx's concept of commodification of labor, revealing the economic foundations of Roman spectacle. **2)** the transformation of Lucius Verus illustrates the development of class consciousness, shifting from individual survival to collective solidarity. **3)** the film's portrayal of Rome's decline demonstrates historical materialism, showing how contradictions in production and power relations lead to social revolution. These insights position *Gladiator II* not merely as entertainment but as a cultural text that critiques systemic oppression and mirrors contemporary issues such as inequality, corruption, and political dominance. By employing Marxist criticism, the study affirms the relevance of class struggle as both a historical and modern narrative.

**Keywords:** *Gladiator II, Marxism, class struggle, historical materialism, exploitation*

### INTRODUCTION

Utilizing theories such as historical materialism and Gramsci's perspective on cultural hegemony, exploitation, alienation, ideology, and resistance, this study merge[valuates] modern critical theory with *Gladiator 2*, Emphasizing Marxist critique of power structures and class struggles in ancient Roman society. Through the examination of the narration, visuals, character design, and dialogues in the film, various trends are suggested that reflect current social issues such as inequality, oppression, or revolution. Consequently, a degree of historical similarity is crossed and linked from the artistic imagination to actuality.

The film's theme analysis was used to uncover its shared message and plot. During their study of the film, researchers meticulously recorded key moments and consulted for supporting material, including interviews with scholars. Researchers categorized the scenes according to recurring themes that included: exploitation, power relations, alienation and class consciousness. The film was broken down into manageable parts for a more comprehensive analysis, as these categories brought together the larger themes of class warfare and systemic oppression.

The upcoming topics consisted of the significant contrast between those who held power, such as the ruling class and slave laborers, the evolution of Lucius Verans from a nobleman to agitator, and the utilization or pretense of violence, spectacle, manipulation, all designed to maintain control. The Colosseum served as a hub of capitalist amusement, with the suffering of many perpetuating their own privileges.<sup>112</sup> Using the Roman Empire as a backdrop for global conflict, *Gladiator 2* builds upon the storyline of its predecessor to offer narrating an account of inequalities, historical oppression, and collective resistance.

These findings were confirmed through archival research, on-site observation, and consultations with historians to ensure historical accuracy. Film realism was achieved by high-definition filmmaking, accurate costumes and period weapons, and re-created ancient musical instruments. Ethical protocols included a focus on academic integrity through faithful representation of the film and Marxist theory, proper citation, and balanced interpretations.

Lastly, *Gladiator 2* is not only an epic historical drama, but a philosophical critique of issues in today's world like slavery, corruption, and centralized power. The film compels people to confront grim realities regarding differences and makes them reflect on unequal systems and where they belong in the grand scheme of things. Through the focus on the ongoing applicability of Marxist principles, it reminds us that class struggle is the common thread in human life and encourages resistance to oppression across history and geography.

<b>Bourgeoisie (Ruling Class)</b>	<b>Proletariat (Oppressed Class)</b>
<p>In the movie “<i>Gladiator 2</i>” this binary opposition can be represented as The Roman Elite (Ruling Class/Bourgeoisie). This includes the Emperor, senators, aristocrats, and other economic elites who both enjoy political and economic power. They control the resources, pass laws, and oppress the masses in a bid to maintain their control. Their lavish lifestyles could not be more different from the suffering of the masses.</p>	<p>The opposing side of The Ruling Class/Bourgeoisie are The Gladiators and Common People (Oppressed Class/Proletariat). These are the individuals forced into servitude, slavery, or poverty. The gladiators, many of whom are former soldiers or slaves, fight for survival and entertainment while being commodified by the ruling class. The common people, though not directly enslaved, are also oppressed by heavy taxation and lack of political representation.</p>

## METHOD

The analysis of *Gladiator II*. Employs both historical and film criticism methodologies, as well as textual and contextual approaches, to scrutinize the impact of ancient Roman society's power structures and class dynamics on the film through a Marxist lens. By scrutinizing the movie's narrative visual representation, character development and dialogue to identify patterns that reflect social issues such as inequality, oppression or revolution in the film, researchers were able to uncover deeper meanings and recurring themes through thematic analysis. Scholars re-edited the film, made detailed notes on key moments and examined interviews, critiques, and press releases.

Key themes included the contrast between the ruling elite bourgeoisie and enslaved gladiators proletariat Lucius Verus' transformation from noble to rebel and the use of violence spectacle and manipulation as tools of control. The Colosseum was seen as a metaphor for capitalist entertainment where the suffering of many supports the power of the few. Through this approach *\*Gladiator II\** continues its predecessor's story while offering a critique of inequality, oppression and resistance using Rome as a backdrop for timeless struggles. To support the study archival research fieldwork was done to ensure historical accuracy. High definition cameras, period costumes and reconstructed instruments improved realism. Ethical concerns focused on accurate representation, proper citation and balanced interpretation. This method helped link cinematic storytelling to real world systems of power and oppression.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. The Commodification of Combat: Exploitation of Labor in Roman Spectacle (feli)

After the initial battle, the depiction of the Numidian people's enslavement highlights the brutality of Roman imperial expansion and its dependence on exploited labor. This series provides an abstract demonstration of Marx's concepts of the exploitation of labor by violently converting humans into commodities. The scene is captured in broad, sweeping shots, revealing the desolation



of the Numidian land and emphasizing the destructive power of Roman soldiers. ". This destruction leads to chaotic handheld camera movements or jarring quick cuts that immerse the viewer in the violence of being subjected to enslavement. The faces of the Numidians are depicted in close-ups to demonstrate their fear, anxiety, and defiance, while

low-angle images of Roman soldiers highlight their power imbalance. Graphic: The glint of branding irons, then tight shots showing the searing flesh and wider images of people herded off and processed like cattle show how dehumanised they are. Smoke and dust dominate the dark hues of these slave galleys, indicating their descent into bondage. Advanced CGI technology highlights the power of the Roman military, opulent landscapes, and the vast number of slave cargoes that supply Rome's unmanageable demands. This is an accurate depiction of their struggles over time. Speech from the enslaved is minimal, with only occasional grumbling or murmurs.

Accumulation of wealth at one pole is therefore accumulation of misery agony of toil slavery ignorance brutality mental degradation at the opposite pole i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital. This opposing pole is embodied by the Numidians who were stripped of their liberty. Rome uses the forced labor of their corpses to create wealth and power by acquiring resources as slaves or gladiators, which are then worth more. This is done through territorial acquisition. Through the visual depiction of their branding and imprisonment, the suffering of slaves in Roman times becomes evident. By exploiting surplus value from conquered populations, the Roman military and administrative system acts as an agent for the ruling class. Through modern digital technology, the glory of Rome is portrayed as being built upon profound human suffering.

Dialogue would be minimal from the enslaved, punctuated by cries of pain or hushed, desperate whispers. In contrast, Roman soldiers would issue barked commands "Move! Faster!" "Brand them!" "Load them onto the ships!" while an official might coldly remark on their market value or their destiny as "fuel for the games," highlighting their reduction to mere economic units. *"Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital"*(Marx, 1867/1990, p. 799). The Numidians, stripped of their freedom, embody this "opposite pole." Their forced labor, their very bodies, are expropriated to generate wealth and power for Rome through territorial gain, resource acquisition, and their subsequent value as slaves or gladiators. The visual narrative of their branding and confinement underscores the "misery, agony of toil slavery" that underpins Roman "magnificence." The Roman military and administrative apparatus acts as the agent of the ruling class, extracting surplus value directly from conquered populations. The "glory" of Rome, so often celebrated in its iconography and architecture vividly realized through modern digital effects, is shown here to be built upon a foundation of such profound human suffering.

The film's decision to explicitly show the process of enslavement rather than presenting gladiators as pre-existing figures in the arena is significant. It functions as an ideological primer connecting the spectacle of the Colosseum directly to the brutal material reality of imperial conquest and labor exploitation. The entertainment of the arena is demystified, exposed not as abstract games but as a direct consequence of violent subjugation. This creates a powerful juxtaposition between Rome's architectural magnificence and its nature as a decadent vile place. Lucius's reported description of Rome as a disease infecting the world further amplifies this critique. This visual and narrative tension mirrors the Marxist understanding of how the ideological superstructure often masks the exploitative economic base. The film forces a confrontation with the source of Rome's wealth and power laying bare the human cost.

## **2. From Chains to Consciousness: The Spark of Class Awareness**

In the gladiatorial barracks, Lucius depicted Gladiator II and portrayed the transformation from individual suffering to collective understanding. At the peak of the story, Lucius meets Ravi, his master and doctor, a freed slave once and is shown a secret shrine left behind by Maximus with his sword and armor. It's a departure from the harshness of the arena. What is it? Through medium, the

two individuals bond in each other's eyes as the shrine is uncovered through a paused tracking. The close-up images of Lucius's face show a gradual shift towards curiosity and reverence as he thinks



about Maximus' stories. The shrine is illuminated by the light of the barracks, serving as a beacon of hope and remembrance of shared history. In Ravi's words, wisdom and quiet pride are accompanied by Lucius, who is an example of an inner awakening. It suggests a hidden culture of rebellion within the slaves.?

Ravi said, "*Maximus showed us that even a slave could challenge an emperor. He fought for something more than survival*" or, gesturing to the armor, "*This... it's a symbol of what we can be, what Rome could be.*" Ravi says Maximus showed us that even a slave could challenge an emperor gesturing to the armor. This is a symbol of what Rome could be. Lucius responds with dawning recognition murmuring he was a hero or later reflecting they see us as animals but Maximus was more Roman than any of them.

According to Karl Marx, economic conditions created a class system that transformed the masses into workers. Capital was merged to create shared interests. While not for itself, this mass is still a class that opposes capital. During the battle, this mass becomes self-sufficient and forms a class identity.' Karl Marx describes the formation of a class "for itself": "*Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle... this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself*" (Marx, 1847/1969). Gladiators are subjected to enslavement and exploitation. The class is in conflict with their Roman counterparts. By serving as catalysts, the shrine and Ravi's tale encourage Lucius and others to embrace their collective suffering and transform it into a class for all of itself. The legacy of Maximus is a source of historical precedent and ideological support. His character exemplifies the potential of a slave who challenges the imperial system and stands as exemplars of genuine Roman virtue, challenging the dominant class's perception of slavery. Through his imitation of Maximus and eventual decision to gather other gladiators, Lucius moves away from retaliation on his own but adopts an attitude of wider systemic opposition.

Through the shrine and oral tradition, Maximus' legacy is preserved, serving as a counter-ideology to the marginalized population. It fosters togetherness and a sense of shared identity that is not constrained by their masters' portrayal of them as idle individuals. These are the stories of history that those in the dominant culture who seek to silence them cherish.... Being free and a slave like Ravi, he represents the potential of breaking free from current circumstances. He provides solace to the wounded and assists in achieving political change. By sharing Maximus's legacy, Lucius gains a greater understanding of collective struggle and the potential for change that was previously lost on his own shoulders. Ravi becomes a political figure, changing shared suffering into unified purpose.

### 3. Echoes of Equality: Imagining a Classless Society in a Fallen Rome

In *Gladiator II*'s final discourse, Lucius emphasizes the need for unity and a more perfect Rome to achieve our common good. Despite their defeat to Macrinus Lucius, the soldiers are now in conflict and are being encouraged to rise up for a better fate. He cites the legacy of his grandfather



Marcus Aurelius and his father Maximus, who were seen by him as an age of justice and shared purpose rather than oppression and inequality. From a chaotic scene to Lucius' transformation and strength in his own image, the camera captures the dramatic moment. The soldiers' faces are covered in a

pancake, indicating their emotional shift from suspicion to joy, and the armies firing their weapons with wide sweeping shots symbolize unity. The transition of the lighting to a warm day implies rebirth. Lucius might declare, "You look to me to speak. I know not what to say other than we have all known too much death. Let no more blood be spilled in the name of tyranny. My grandfather Marcus Aurelius talked about a dream that would be Rome, a dream that my father, Maximus Decimus Meridius, died for. An ideal. A city for the many and a refuge for those in need, a home worth fighting for, a home Maximus spent his life defending. That dream is lost. But dare we rebuild that dream together? What say you?" The crowd is silent at first, murmurs spread, then loud unified voices respond with one strong word "Aye!"

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto*, envision a future society: "When, in the course of development, class distinctions have disappeared, and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation, the public power will lose its political character... *"In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"* (Marx, 1848).

Lucius's message is rooted in the idea of collective struggle and breaking down class distinctions, even in an imperfect communist state. He believes that a united front is in line with the ideas of Marx and Engels, who advocated for 'national associations serving everyone' rather than individual monopolies or ruling elites. The combination of armies is accompanied by tension through the use of military power. Organized force, according to Marxists, may not lead to actual emancipation but may bring about new forms of control. At last, there is hope and irony present.' The book presents a utopian concept of inclusivity and shared accomplishment, while also acknowledging the difficulty of building up society.

#### **4. The Two Faces of Power: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat in Imperial Rome**

The connection between Macrinus, a wealthy gladiator who used to be enslaved but later



became an organised criminal organization, and the twin emperors Geta and Caracalla also serves as an example. Macrinus coerces Caracalla into killing his brother during the film's climax, demonstrating how an ambitious new character exploits the decline of

the traditional ruling class. A relationship that highlights the deteriorating aristocracy being challenged by ruthless emergent bourgeoisie, who are both built on the exploits of gladians, the laborers.

The Emperors' erratic behavior contrasts with Macrinus's sharp and calculated presence in their interactions. Both are depicted in cinematography. His steady, centered shots highlight his control and their unstable compositions expose their lack of ability. The utilization of strategic lighting and over-the-shoulder shots emphasizes the importance of changing power dynamics,

particularly with Macrinus positioned in shadow and the Emperors being exposed to excessive brightness or moral decay. The character of Macrinus is portrayed by Denzel Washington, who portrays him with masked composure and ambition, while Geta and Caracallum exhibit arrogant paranoia that suggests they are foolish. They highlight the difference between aristocratic yet unfinished palaces and Macrinus' functional wealth. In a conversation, it is revealed that he manipulates people by suggesting that Rome's divine guidance could be used to remind them of their power, while in private, liaison believes that they are fooled by Rome being too strong. The Emperors then declare themselves Rome and rely on Macrinus to do the right thing among them.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto*, describe the transformative, and often destructive, impact of the bourgeoisie:

*"The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, callous 'cash payment'" (Marx & Engels, 1848/2010, p. 47).*

Marx and Engels describe the bourgeoisie as ending feudal relations and replacing them with naked self interest. The Emperors of ancient Rome, despite being not feudal, were an ageing aristocracy that held onto inherited authority. By utilizing economic power and political skill to manipulate others, Macrinus is a new bourgeoisie politician who views the Emperors as subservient. Gladiators, such as Lucius, symbolize the labor of the commoners, whose suffering and work contributes to the system. The film thus portrays a multi layered class structure: decadent aristocracy, emerging bourgeoisie and exploited working class.

Macrinus functions as a transitional figure exhibiting traits of an emergent bourgeoisie accumulating capital through human commodities using economic power for political gain and operating on rational self interest rather than tradition. His conflict with the Emperors represents a form of class struggle within the ruling elite both dependent on proletarian exploitation. Additionally the film reportedly uses “queer coding” for villains contrasting them with heterosexual heroes. While potentially problematic this visual strategy marks corrupt figures for condemnation reinforcing ideological narratives about natural order and justice. A Marxist critique analyzes both class positions and the film’s ideological construction including its visual coding of villainy.

## 5. The Material Forces of History: Historical Materialism and Rome's Unraveling

The depiction of a divided, unpopular, and corrupt Roman society serves as an example of Marx's historical materialism theory. Additionally, In the movie, there is an empire that is about to



fail because of internal conflicts within its economic and social fabric. General Acacius, Macrinus and Emperors Geta and Caracalla, as well as the slave gladiators, are all considered different layers of this collating system. An important example of this breakdown is the riot that broke out in the Colosseum

after the execution of Acacius. The use of handheld cameras and fast-paced editing would result in a scene that places the audience in the middle of the chaos. While close-ups capture intense emotions like anger, fear or opportunistic scenarios in Rome, wide shots reveal the extent of the turmoil spreading throughout the city. The presence of imperial symbols like the Praetorian Guard or their inability to maintain order during times of violence.. Torches, a fire glow, and smoke dominate the lighting, creating heightened senses of destruction. CGI technology is utilized to depict the massive crowds, property destruction, and urban decay in Rome. Sound design includes shouts such as "*Down with the Emperors!* " and even "*Justice for Acacius!*", which serve to reinforce the collapse of social order..

As Marx explained in the. Preface for "A contribution to the examination of Political Economy." In situations where the mode of production contradicts current relations, the start of a social revolution occurs. "*At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production... From forms of development of the productive forces, these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.*" (Marx, 1859, p. 6). In Gladiator II, Rome's production system relies on the use of slavery, military conquest, and exploitation of conquered regions. The economic foundation is built on a rigid class hierarchy that includes emperors, senators and generali, merchants such as carnal dealers, plebeians, and slave laborers. These production relations are portrayed in the film during a crisis.' Both emperors represent the decaying elite, disconnected from reality and without any real power to govern. The military's significant presence, as demonstrated by General Acacius, indicates

disillusionment. Gladiators, as a group, exhibit increasing revolutionary and unrest. The emergence of a new era of social instability is marked by tensions, such as slaves fighting against bondage, Macrinus' opposition to imperial power, and the widespread rioting.

Material circumstances and class orientation influence the actions of characters. The emperors have not kept up with the constant presence of privilege. Macrinus, a former slave turned schemer, seeks to achieve power through personal trauma and ambition. Why? Lucius's transformation from a young child to enslaved warrior and leader in revolutionary struggle is attributed to his direct experience of oppression. The riot scene is not just a random act of disorder, but also the culmination of persistent inexplicable contradictions. It demonstrates how the political and social structure crumbles under the weight of its own economic and class dynamics.

Gladiator II's narrative centers on individual heroism and avarice, reflecting a systemic crisis. According to a historical materialist perspective, social change is not caused by isolated events but rather by deep-rooted structural conflicts and ongoing class conflict. Without mentioning any Marxist arguments, the film presents a compelling narrative of societal disintegration under its own inconsistencies. The foundations of the "Dream of Rome" are crumbling, causing it to appear dead. Additionally, the movie portrays the interconnection between individual action and broader material factors. Behind the scenes, betrayals, rebellions, and assassinations are not isolated events; they stem from economic circumstances. Gladiators, who are already oppressed and prepared to resist, can only be resisted with strong will by Lucius. Macrinus takes control because the empire is already vulnerable.

According to historic materialism the "era of social revolution" is a general condition, but its exact nature depends on human decisions during that crisis. While material forces are responsible for the magnitude of change, it is precisely the individuals who impact it. Thus, Gladiator II is not a straightforward historical interpretation, but rather a demonstration on how general patterns and individual decisions influence the trajectory of past events.

## **CONCLUSION**

The discussion centers on the themes of class struggle and oppression in Gladiator II, utilizing Karl Marx's theory for class conflict. In the film, class divisions are reinforced by structural inequalities and exploitation, with an emphasis on the struggle between the ruling class (bourgeoisie) and the exploitative working-class (proletariat). The movie portrays the suffering of Lucius Verus and the gladiators' pain as it illustrates powerful cycles in which power is cyclical, fluid social structures are

present, and resistance to authoritarian regimes can be mutually reinforced. The events portrayed in *Gladiator II* are not solely historical, but also reflect current issues such as slavery and corruption. Additionally, it encourages viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about inequality and highlights the significance of Marxist philosophy in understanding contemporary social issues. Its compelling narrative prompts us to reflect on the oppressive effects of class and promotes greater social inclusion. This analysis draws on historical events such as *Gladiator II* to illustrate how modern slavery, economic inequality and systemic oppression can be used in the real world. Why is this important? The film is framed as a response to contemporary issues such as forced employment, political corruption, and wealth, while also providing an opportunity for viewers to question their place in society. It also prompts critical analysis of how power structures function and the role of people in making meaningful changes.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Marx, K. (1847/1969). *The poverty of philosophy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Marx, K. (1848). *The Communist Manifesto*.

Marx, K. (1859). *A contribution to the critique of political economy* (S. W. Ryazanskaya, Trans.). Moscow: Progress Publishers. (Original work published 1859)

Marx, K. (1867/1990). *Capital: A critique of political economy, Volume I* (B. Fowkes, Trans.). London: Penguin.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848/2010). *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Verso.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1998). *The German ideology* (C. J. Arthur, Ed.). Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. (Original work published 1932)