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DISSIDENTING MASCULINITIES AND SEXUALITIES IN *GLADIATOR II*: THE CONSTRUCTION OF MACRINUS AS AN ANTAGONIST

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Abstract

This study examines the representations of dissident masculinities and sexualities in *Gladiator II* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2024), discussing how it reinscribes into new forms gender and race stereotypes that have been inherited from the classic epics of the mid-20th century. From the perspective of reception studies of Antiquity, this study analyzes how the film reupdates moral and visual structures that reiterate the association between sexual and gender dissidence and villainy. Macrinus' figure, an antagonist who condenses gender and ethnic-racial stereotypes, constitutes the central focus of this analysis. This study found that, despite apparent advances in the representation of sexual and ethnic-racial diversity in contemporary productions about Roman Antiquity, *Gladiator II* reaffirms White heteronormative masculinity as the rightful heir to the Western Roman legacy in contrast to a racialized and sexually deviant otherness.

Keywords

Gladiator II; Masculinities; Sexualities; Cinema and Antiquity; Reception Studies.

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Resumo

O artigo examina as representações de masculinidades e sexualidades dissidentes no filme *Gladiador II* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2024), discutindo como a obra reinscreve, sob novas formas, estereótipos de gênero e raça herdados dos épicos clássicos de meados do século XX. À luz dos estudos de recepção da Antiguidade, analisa-se de que modo o filme reatualiza estruturas morais e visuais que reiteram a associação entre dissidências sexuais e de gênero à vilania. A figura de Macrinus, antagonista que condensa estereótipos de gênero e étnico-raciais, constitui o foco central da análise. Conclui-se que, apesar de aparentes avanços na representação da diversidade sexual e étnico-racial em produções contemporâneas sobre a Antiguidade Romana, *Gladiador II* reafirma a masculinidade branca e heteronormativa como herdeira legítima do legado romano-ocidental, em contraste com uma alteridade racializada e sexualmente desviante.

Palavras-chave

Gladiador II; masculinidades; sexualidades; cinema e Antiguidade; Estudos de Recepção.

The relations between cinema and Antiquity date back to the beginnings of the seventh art itself: the first film to address figures and themes from this historical period was the Lumière brothers' (1896) *Néron essayant des poisons sur des esclaves* (Nero testing poison on his slaves). However, one of the most expressive cycles of film production about Antiquity occurred in the 1950s and 1960s under the hegemony of Hollywood (Wyke, 1997). Continuing a tradition that had been inaugurated in the 1930s, the productions of this period (generally set in Ancient Rome) associated antagonistic Roman characters with gender and sexuality performances the American society of the time deemed eccentric and/or dissident (Menezes & Pinto, 2024). Homoeroticism stood out in these representations, often mobilized as a sign of vice, decadence, or villainy (Russo, 1981; Cyrino, 2014). This moral codification occurred in films such as *The Serpent of the Nile* (Dir. William Castle, 1953), *Ben-Hur* (Dir. William Wyler, 1959), and *Spartacus* (Dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1960).

On the eve of the 21st century, *Gladiator* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2000) revived interest in filmic narratives set in Antiquity and resumed the discourse that associates sexual dissidence with villainy. Its plot follows Maximus (Russell Crowe), a former general who, reduced to a gladiator, seeks revenge on Emperor Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), who caused the death of his family and configures a symbol of Roman moral decadence. Maximus is constructed with a heroic and heteronormative masculinity in contrast to the antagonist Commodus, whose depiction combines traits of emotional fragility and sexual deviance. Ridley Scott returned to the Roman universe two decades later with *Gladiator II* (2024). The new plot follows Lucius/Hanno (Paul Mescal) who, as the last legitimate heir to the Roman throne, lives in exile in North Africa to protect himself from assassination attempts. The narrative resumes the dynamics of the original film: Lucius and Acacius (Pedro Pascal), protagonists of the new story, are characterized as bearers of normative masculinities and sexualities. In contrast, three characters stand out as their representations evoke counter-hegemonic masculinities: emperors Caracalla (Fred Hechinger) and Geta (Joseph Quinn) and the main antagonist, Macrinus (Denzel Washington).

Based on these assumptions and in the light of the concept of reception, this study reflects on the intersections between cinema, Roman Antiquity, gender, and sexuality. It mainly aims to examine the masculinities and sexualities associated with the male antagonists in *Gladiator II*, especially Macrinus. By analyzing the discourses conveyed on and off screen about this character, this study seeks to contribute to the debates about the ways

in which Hollywood cinema has updated, questioned, or perpetuated stereotypes and power structures in narratives set in the past.

Classical reception, historical fiction, and cinema

In the last 30 years, reception theory has become an important and fundamental part of classical studies, having moved from the periphery to the center of research on Antiquity (Bakogianni, 2018). This changed views on ancient texts, no longer seen as static sources frozen in time but as sources under constant change. Historians receive no untouched sources directly from the past as they also have their own history, from their creation to the present day, that requires consideration (Martindale, 2006: 24). Discussing the concept of reception, Hartog (2005) points out that the relationship between past and present is a two-way process: it influences the present and is, at the same time, influenced by it, and it is impossible to separate them. Based on this perspective, the author challenges the notion that the ancient world is transmitted to us as an intact legacy that has undergone no transformations over time.

Historical fiction plays a central role in how contemporary societies relate to the past. For Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998), although largely present in people's lives, the history from textbooks and academia fails to excite people and develop a strong connection in them with the past as strongly as historical fiction. Its wide popularity and reach make historical fiction the main point of contact with history for many, including future historians (Bond, 2017). More than simple entertainment, these works construct powerful discourses that shape the collective memory and consolidate widely accepted versions of certain periods, events, or historical characters.

Within the universe of historical fiction, few media have as much relevance as cinema. Even so, only in the last decades did it occupy a prominent place in studies on the reception of Antiquity (Wyke, 1997: 03). Currently, by being deemed as a central element in the analysis of the reception of Antiquity in mass culture and in its teaching, cinema is understood as a vehicle that plays a crucial role in the way Ancient Rome is perceived and imagined by contemporary audiences. According to Jeffrey Richards (2008: 01), in a now-famous quote about the depiction of the past in historical films, "it is a truism that historical films are always about the time in which they are made and never about the time in which they are set."

To the extent that it reinterprets the past according to the demands and sensibilities of the present, historical fiction reflects the culture that produces it and actively participates in the formation of identities and the legitimation of historical narratives. However, Maria Wyke (1997) states that if cinematographic narratives and historical fiction say more about the time and place in which they were produced than about the past they intend to represent, it makes no sense to seek a supposed historical authenticity in them. More relevant than questioning whether a certain event, character, or representation "really happened" is to investigate why these choices are being made in this way. Which aspects are highlighted and which remain silent? With whom or with what historical and cultural context are these works dialoguing?

By transferring contemporary concerns to a familiar historical context and projecting features of modern empires onto Ancient Rome, these cinematic representations enable audiences to distance themselves from that past and relate to it. These works often emphasize extremes of power, wealth, and sexual behavior, offering ways to understand, question, or legitimize current social structures (Joshel, Malamud, & McGuire, 2001: 04). This relationship between past and present in cinema is far from hidden; quite the contrary. From the beginning, the *Gladiator* (2000) production team, for example, made it clear that the connections between Ancient Rome and the United States were far from mere chance. As screenwriter David Franzoni, responsible for the script of the first film, says, "the film is about us. It's not just about ancient Rome, it's about America." (Elliott, 2014: 10). Likewise, Ridley Scott invites viewers to explicitly make this parallel in *Gladiator II* (2024) by comparing Macrinus with American President Donald Trump (The Hollywood Reporter, 2024).

Masculinities in Ancient Rome and Hollywood Rome

Studies on the reception of Roman Antiquity in cinema constitute a fruitful field to investigate how contemporaneity constructs, appropriates, and sometimes tensions discourses about gender and sexuality. Since its first instances, Hollywood epics have represented the Ancient World on screen as a space of excesses, desires, and sexual practices most of its viewers deem dissident (Cyrino, 2014: 614). As mentioned, this cinematic tradition, far from simply reconstructing a historical past, acts as a kind of mirror of the anxieties, values, and sexual norms prevailing in the context of its production. Thus, Roman-themed films show more about modern modes

of understanding masculinities and sexualities than about the ways in which Romans effectively understood and experienced these categories.

As per Craig A. Williams (2010) and Jean-Paul Thuillier (2013), ancient Roman society articulated the ideals of masculinity based on moral virtues, bodily attributes, social status, and sexual role. The expected physical and moral characteristics of the virile Roman include tanned complexion and body, athletic body, no buttock waxing, courage for war, propensity to practice sports, modesty clothing, and control of his home and Roman political life (Thuillier, 2013: 94-112). Especially the textual sources from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D. indicate that the essential elements of sexual practices resided in the positions taken by the Roman citizen (*uir*) during the sexual act (from which an active and dominant posture was expected), in the social status of their partners, and in the self-control of desires and passions of love. Thus, the restrictions were related to the social condition of the passive partners rather than to their sex. On the other hand, being a citizen unable to control their sexual impulses or carnal passions, even if directed toward the female sex, was considered a moral failure and synonymous with effeminacy (Williams, 2010: 137-77).

For example, a passage from the comedy *Curculio* by Plautus (c. 230—180 BC) deftly illustrates this ideal of male sexual practices as it states that the Roman citizen could become sexually involved with whomever he wished "so long as you stay away from the married woman, the widow, the virgin, the youth, and freeborn boys" (Plaut. *Gorg*. 37—38). Thus, once married, citizens had the right to direct their advances to their wives and (whether married or single) to slaves, prostitutes, and non-citizens of both sexes. Ancient literary sources even indicate a trend according to which adolescent male slaves—called *pueri*, *adulescentuli*, or *iuvenes*—were considered the ideal receptive partners (Williams, 2010: 19). Moreover, this preference for young people included the use of slaves and/or adult prostitutes (known as *exoleti*). Thus, the Roman masculinity ideal integrated itself with the assumption that the citizen could (and in a certain sense should) have sexual experiences with other men in certain configurations (Williams, 2010: 17). What defined the loss of *uirilitas* (virility) or characterized a dissident sexual practice was, rather than the sex of the partner, the relationship role: penetrating meant exercising dominance and affirming masculinity, whereas being penetrated and practicing fellatio on another man or cunnilingus on a woman, to abdicate (even if temporarily) this virility (Thuillier, 2013: 83).

However, these norms did not imply that all Roman citizens were restricted to the prescribed conducts (Pinto, 2012: 119). As Clarke observes (1998: 26), it is unlikely that the entire Roman population fully accepted the values the dominant culture sought to impose. Just as in contemporary societies, which include subjects who resist the normative ideologies of sexuality and gender, Roman Antiquity also had those who challenged such codes sustained by an aristocratic and patriarchal morality. The existence of rules—or of *masculinity protocols*, to use Williams' (2010) concept—highlights the mismatch between the normative ideal and the daily practices of free, enslaved, citizen, or foreigner men and women. In this sense, the reading of *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, written around 119-122 A.D., shows numerous episodes of transgression of the expectations of active male sexual practices. Likewise, the graffiti in Pompeii and the visual representations across the ancient Roman world show mismatches between moral discourse and effective practices (Feitosa, 2014; Garraffoni & Sanfelice, 2014). Still, neither the aristocrats nor the lower classes in ancient Rome had sexual categorizations and identities such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality.

Understanding these distinctions is fundamental to analyze how cinema re-signifies the Roman past and projects contemporary conceptions of sexual and gender normativity onto it. Unlike what happened among the ancients, heteronormativity[3], a system of sexual and gender values that defines heterosexuality (especially the monogamous, marital, and reproductive one) regulate the current hegemonic ideals of masculinity as the most appropriate or legitimate form of sexual expression (Wittig, 2025; Rubin, 2017; Miskolci, 2021). Rubin (2017: 85-7) finds that this system hierarchizes erotic desires and practices, rigidly delimiting what is considered "normal," "healthy," and "moral," situating practices that escape these parameters (such as homosexuality, bisexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, or casual sex) on the social periphery, and associating them with deviance, pathology, or immorality. This moral structure regulates bodies and pleasures and reinforces models of masculinity sustained by domination, misogyny, violence, and the repression of feelings. Rubin (2017: 82) also emphasizes that, unlike other human pleasures, such as art, food, or science, the social acceptance of

[3] Heteronormativity can be understood as the contemporary dominant sexual order, according to which everyone is socialized to adopt heterosexuality as a standard of life. Richard Miskolci (2021: 43) argues that gays and lesbians who align themselves with heterosexual standards can also act as agents of this order. In this context, homophobia more often affects those who fail to conform to certain standards rather than impacting all homosexual individuals equally. Thus, heterosexuals and homosexuals can be socially normalized and reproduce prejudices regarding those who live, act, or think differently regarding gender and sexuality.

sexuality in today's Western world constantly requires external justifications (such as love and/or a long-term intimate relationship).

The contrast between the sexual and moral logic of Ancient Rome and contemporary values constitutes a fertile ground on which cinema projects fantasies, sexual practices, and gender performances it sees as abject within the context of its production. Since the first works set in the Roman world, villains generally show homoerotic desires and behaviors Antiquity may have understood as compatible with the ideal of Roman masculinity. However, transposed to cinema, such desires, practices, and performances cease to represent a legitimate form of masculinity and begin to symbolize sexual deviation, corruption of power, and moral decadence (Cyrino, 2014: 615). For example, in *The Sign of the Cross* (Dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1932), the sexuality of the antagonistic Romans, although codified, includes elements of sadomasochism and homoeroticism. The heroes, constructed as Christians, are portrayed as bearers of a heterosexual, chaste, and monogamous virtue.

The Hays Code (1934—1966)[4] intensified these strategies. Censorship required that any reference to "sexual perversion"—a term that included homoeroticism—be eliminated, forcing filmmakers to resort to subtle innuendo, subtexts, and visual encodings. Cyrino (2014) highlights that this context tensioned the desire to represent alternative sexualities and masculinities and the need to adapt to the compulsory heterosexual norm. Films such as *Quo Vadis* (Dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1951) illustrate this tension: it codifies the scenes of banquets and orgies as expressions of moral deviation and represents elite Roman women as active subjects of sexual desire in opposition to the chaste, private, and domestic love that characterizes the Christian protagonist couple (Cyrino, 2014: 617). The film portrays Emperor Nero (Peter Ustinov) as effeminate, spoiled, and excessively theatrical in opposition to the hero Marcus Vinicius (Robert Taylor), whose virility and self-restraint reiterate the normative values of masculinity in force in the United States in the 1950s. In *Serpent of the Nile* (Dir. William Castle,1953), the relationship between the Romans Mark Antony (Raymond Burr) and Lucilius (William Lundigan) includes

[4] From the 1930s to the 1960s, American film production was subjected to a rigid system of self-regulation known as the Hays Code, officially named Motion Picture Production Code. Created by Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America under the coordination of Will H. Hays, this set of rules had the declared purpose of ensuring respect for good customs and public morals. In practice, this meant imposing a series of restrictions on film content, limiting the representation of themes such as homosexuality, violence, and religion (Black, 1996). More than a simple ethical guide, the Hays Code functioned as a mechanism of moral and ideological censorship following patriarchal and heteronormative values that sought to silence expressions of gender, race, and sexuality that were deemed incompatible with the conservative ideal of US society at the time.

homoerotic subtexts embodied in gestures and looks (Menezes & Pinto, 2024: 93).

This type of coding also occurs in *Ben-Hur* (Dir. William Wyler, 1959). Writer Gore Vidal, who anonymously collaborated in writing its script, proposed that the reunion between the protagonists insinuated a romantic past between them: Messala's (Stephen Boyd) desire to resume such a relationship and the refusal of Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston), now committed to a heterosexual and monogamous union (Vidal, 1987: 84—85). In response to Vidal's proposal, director William Wyler instructed actor Stephen Boyd to manifest in this scene an intense and emotional affection that maintained the ambiguity needed to avoid an explicit reading of his character's feelings and desires. At the time, no public reference was made to the possible sexual connotations of the tension between Messala and Ben-Hur, although a portion of the public may have noticed them. In any case, although the subtext originates from the contribution of a screenwriter who identified himself as a gay man, its transposition to the screen remained subordinated to the logic that associates the villainy of Roman characters with affective-sexual desires and practices considered dissident in relation to the normative morality in force at the time of the production of the film.

Another paradigmatic example is *Spartacus* (Dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1960). The film contrasts Crassus (Laurence Olivier) and Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) as representatives of antagonistic masculinities: Spartacus is idealized as virile, protective, and affectionately linked to Antoninus (Tony Curtis), his young ally and protégé, whereas Crassus is represented as an ambitious and sexually predatory libertine driven by homoerotic desires towards Antoninus (Menezes & Pinto, 2024: 89-90). The famous "oysters and snails" scene presents Crassus' attempt to seduce Antoninus via dialogues full of sexual ambiguity and codified homoerotic gestures, elements that were censored at the time, but which were restored in later versions of the film (Cyrino, 2014). These examples show how cinema projected sexual ambiguity and resisted a code of censorship while reproducing a discourse that reaffirmed heteronormativity as the norm and heterosexual relationships as the only ones possible for upstanding and virtuous individuals.

In addition to the discussed concept of heteronormativity, Wittig's (2025) concept of "straight mind" contributes to the understanding of how this logic works. According to the author, heterosexual thought constitutes an epistemological and political regime that universalizes heterosexuality as a matrix of social intelligibility, naturalizing sexual difference as the

foundation of human organization. In films set in Ancient Rome, this regime manifests itself in the insistence on framing the sexual practices of that historical period in binary and modern moral categories, converting diverse cultural expressions into signs of perversion or exoticism. Thus, cinema reinterprets the past and symbolically colonizes it, imposing on it the regime of truth of Western contemporaneity. Disciplined eroticism and heterosexual masculinity function as models of conduct and reinforce the centrality of heterosexuality in the current hegemonic ideals of masculinity. At the same time, deviant representations, portrayed as exotic, decadent, or tragic, reaffirm the limits of acceptable and legitimate sexuality. They simultaneously fascinate and threaten, operating as metaphors for the social tensions of each historical context of production.

Gladiator II and the figure of Macrinus: dissident masculinity and ethnic-racial stereotypes

On the eve of the 21st century, *Gladiator* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2000) revived interest in cinematic narratives set in antiquity and updated the moral logic characteristic of the 1950s' and 1960s' epics. Ethical deviance continued to be associated with gendered performances and sexual practices considered deviant; what changed was the symbolic content of these anxieties, reformulated in the light of the concerns of American society in the new century. Despite its modernized appearance, Ridley Scott's film preserved the binary structure that links the ideal male body to virtue and salvation and associated dissident sexualities with moral decadence. In this sense, Maximus (Russell Crowe) (the general turned slave and gladiator who faces the emperor by the end of the movie) was built as the morally upright and heteronormative bearer of a warrior masculinity. His antagonist, Emperor Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), embodied the reverse side of this configuration: a degenerate masculinity including traces of effeminacy, emotional instability, and incestuous desires (Pierce, 2017; Menezes & Pinto, 2024).

In 2024, Ridley Scott returned to the Roman universe with *Gladiator II*, the plot of which centers on Lucius (Paul Mescal), also called Hanno, the legitimate heir to the imperial throne who lives in exile in North Africa to escape conspiracies and assassination attempts. The sequel evokes the narrative structure of the original film. For example, Maximus is now doubly represented by the figures of Lucius/Hanno—his lost son who also becomes a gladiator and seeks revenge against those responsible for the death of his wife—and that of Acacius (Pedro Pascal), the Roman general

who seems to be in conflict with the direction of the Empire and uncomfortable as "the hero of Rome." On the other hand, twin emperors Caracalla (Fred Hechinger) and Geta (Joseph Quinn)—also portrayed with traces of effeminacy—and, above all, Macrinus (Denzel Washington) reflect Emperor Commodus.

At first glance, Macrinus evokes Proximo—Maximus' mentor in the original film—as he emerges in the plot when Lucius is captured and sold as a gladiator, guiding and supporting him. Initially shown as a rich and influential man with access to arenas and the political elite of Rome, Macrinus seems willing to help the protagonist. However, the narrative shows that he controls a gladiatorial school, profits from supplying weapons to the Roman army, and seems to have a keen interest in the politics of the city. In the end, the great narrative turn of the film exposes Macrinus as the true antagonist. He, more than the twin emperors, must be defeated so that Rome can reestablish itself to the standards in Marcus Aurelius' dream.

The representation of the emperors in *Gladiator II* follows the tradition of characterizing villains and antagonists as bearers of deviant sexualities and gender performances. Macrinus is no different, although his case brings up specific issues related to ethnic-racial aspects and his representation as a foreigner (despite his Roman citizenship). This incorporates its own series of stereotypes that are articulated with these deviant performances. It is significant that, in a film including the queercoding of several characters, Macrinus is the only one in whose representation the homoerotic desire goes beyond the subtext to which it is normally confined, manifesting itself explicitly. In a conversation about who would have fathered Lucius, the following dialogue occurs between Macrinus and a quaestor:

> Macrinus: And his father?
> Quaestor: Ostensibly, Lucius Verus. See, it was an arranged marriage. She was fourteen. Females were not his taste.
> Macrinus: Nor mine somedays!
> Quaestor: Nor yours! (both laugh) (*Gladiator*, 2024, -1:18:15)

Note that while the characters talk in this scene, Macrinus insinuates himself to a female slave who is serving wine. This behavior reinforces the idea of an unruly and predatory sexuality, a trait that is often attributed in the cinematographic imagination to villains coded as bisexual, as in

Crassus in *Spartacus* (1960). Ridley Scott, when asked about Washington's character showing some "hints of bisexuality," replied laconically: "There's a twinkle. Also, he's a gangster." (New York Times, 2024). The director seems to have no interest in exploring this dimension of the character, despite multiple questions about the subject. For him, Macrinus' "twinkle" and "being a gangster" belong to a moral construction of the character.

Beyond the film, interviews with the production, direction, and cast are fundamental to analyze the construction of Macrinus' character. Beyond its characterization remains the question of how this relates to a series of discourses about Rome, about who has the right to appropriate this past, and who is seen as an intruder. Pierce (2011) points out that these narratives construct the identity of villains based on physical and sexual aspects and morally reprehensible actions. For the author, the tendency of these characters toward feminization or even emasculation acts as the reason and sign of their "perverse" nature and tyrannical rule. The film characterizes Macrinus' sexuality as outside the norm (unlike protagonists Lucius and Acacius) and his gender performance as deviant. This representation has an Orientalist bias, as will be explored below.

Cinema, especially Hollywood, has (and still does) undeniably shaped much of the popular imagination about Ancient Rome and Antiquity. However, numerous 19th-century works of art about this period have shaped and inspired Hollywood (Richards, 2008). Such paintings continue to greatly influence cinema, as with Macrinus. Scott said in an interview that the inspiration for the character came directly from a painting by French painter Jean León Gerome since "The guy is absolutely Black as the telephone and hes magnificent. He's got a beard with a point and a great jeweled, Dizzy Gillespie hat in orange and blue silk" (New York Times 2024). According to the costume designer of the film Janty Yates, the guidance on the aesthetic direction to be followed came directly from Ridley Scott:

> (…) Specifically, Yates said they sought inspiration in the 'art of Orientalism,' including paintings by Jean-Léon Gérôme, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. (GQ, 2024)
>
> At one point, there was an idea of putting him in a headpiece, but since Scott nor Washington liked the idea, it was quickly nixed (…) (Variety, 2024)

Orientalism, according to Edward Said (2007), is the discourse by which European culture managed to politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively produce the Orient. This thinking is based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between "the East" and "the West." This enduring and powerful discourse stems from Western cultural hegemony, which is intrinsically linked to the concept of the "idea of Europe" that establishes a collective identity ("we Europeans") in opposition to non-Europeans. The central component of this hegemony is the belief in European identity as above all other peoples and cultures. European ideas about the East, which reiterate European superiority over "Eastern backwardness," reinforce this hegemony (Said, 2007: 29). Thus, the West identifies itself as scientific, rational, cultured, and moral and the East as barbaric, irrational, anti-scientific, culturally inferior, and immoral. For Said, literature and the arts were fundamental pieces in constructing and disseminating the Orientalist discourse, which *Gladiator II* perpetuates by reproducing the Orientalist images in 19th-century paintings.

If traditional discourse deems the East, in principle, as the opposite of the West and the societies of Classical Antiquity as "cradles of Western civilization," Macrinus by default antithesizes what "true" Rome represents. Lucius, Marcus Aurelius, and his "Roman dream" embody such "true" Rome. Thus, although Macrinus declares himself a Roman, he is not characterized as such: his citizenship is nothing more than empty rhetoric that hides sinister plans behind it (the destruction of Rome). John Mathieson, the production's cinematographer, describes Macrinus as follows:

> He's remarkable looking. He's very bling, flamboyant and **he's robed, and he's obviously not from Rome**, but he has done very well. He's deeply mischievous, treacherous, and you feel that. He is incredibly polite and kind, even to those who owe him money." (Variety, 2024)

This description encompasses all the attributes Said described as defining the Orient according to the Orientalist discourse. A point in the quote is noteworthy: "he's obviously not from Rome." The following question remains: what characteristics render this statement as evident according to Mathieson? The answer lies in a set of interconnected characteristics: color, clothing, speech, sexual behavior, and gender performance. The production of *Gladiator II* makes it clear that the use of vibrant colors in the

clothing of its male characters and the use of jewelry and props is closely linked to their Oriental, deviant, and effeminate character: "(…) But Denzel wore earrings throughout, which I was delighted with. It gives Macrinus that slight oriental quirk" (Motion Picture Association, 2024). The same question leads to another conclusion: why would Acacius, on the other hand, obviously be Roman? Incidentally, the same goes for Lucius, despite supposedly being a slave coming from Numidia, his "true Roman nature" is unable to be hidden despite his attempts.

The Western construction of the East as "the Other" has served to justify imperialism and colonialism for more than two centuries. "These constructs have been both racialised and gendered and continue to function in contemporary times" (Khalid, 2011: 02). Dyer (1997), in his book on Whiteness, discusses how at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the classical world was associated, albeit in a controversial way, with the white Caucasian. Although it refers to past centuries, this type of imaginary remains extremely powerful (if not hegemonic) in thinking about the representation of Antiquity in historical fiction. It is important to note that Macrinus is the only non-White character of relevance in the film. This contributes to depicting the character as someone who does not belong to that world and as a mirror to Lucius' situation. After all, the protagonist and hero of the film is the only white (and Roman) living in Numidia, who, despite his efforts, is unable to hide his true "Roman nature." Throughout the film, although Lucius claims to be African and Numidian, no one believes him either for his physical appearance or culture, as when he recites Virgil. This is one of the points that makes his disguise begin to be revealed. In fact: "(…) the lines you recited, you didn't learn that in Africa, I know that (…) (*Gladiator II*, 2024, -1:44:5). This problematic statement has little to do with the reality of the region in the period the film is set. On the contrary, that reality faced a shortage of North African Roman citizens from all social spheres, especially since Rome had ruled these regions for a long time (Bond, 2024). This reinforces the discourse of Roman Antiquity as a past that naturally belongs exclusively to what is called the West and consolidates a normative masculinity (identified as proper to Western man), as discussed earlier. Everything outside this norm is understood as deviant.

Another example of how this manifests itself in the narrative of *Gladiator II* refers to Washington, as Macrinus, kissing another man, a scene the actor claims was cut from the final version of the film. Although such cut has generated controversy regarding the censorship of homoerotic

relationships on stage, Washington's description raises a noteworthy detail:

> (He) also explained that, in the plot, after the kiss, his character ends up killing the man (…): "I actually kissed a man in the film but they took it out, they cut it, I think they got chicken. I kissed a guy full on the lips and I guess they weren't ready for that yet. I killed him about five minutes later. It's 'Gladiator.' **It's the kiss of death**." The actor also spoke to Variety magazine about the subject, saying that it was a "peck": "It's really much ado about nothing (…) **I kissed him on his hands, I gave him a peck and I killed him**" (Aventuras na História, 2024, emphasis added).

This representation follows a recurring pattern in cinema and in other types of narrative, in which villains often (although not necessarily) explore their sexuality as a form of sexual threat toward protagonists. Furthermore, homoeroticism is often associated with death and is inseparably linked to a criminal act, the "kiss of death." Although the kiss was cut, the film includes other situations in which such threat manifests itself by homoerotic suggestions, as in the conversation between Macrinus and Senator Thraex, who at that moment had lost his entire fortune to Washington's character (*Gladiator II*, 2024, -1:01:42). However, Macrinus wants information about Rome rather than money. Thraex is portrayed as effeminate and (precisely because of that) vulnerable to Macrinus' manipulation and corruption. Thraex reveals the conspiracy led by Acacius and Lucilla, which results in their capture. What stands out is the body language between Thraex and Macrinus: kisses on the hands and cheek and hands that hold each other or rest on the other's chest during the dialogue; gestures that seem intimate and affective but which, when performed by Macrinus, acquire a sinister connotation. They hide a clear threat of violence and betrayal, constituting a simulacrum. In fact, the scene Washington claimed to have been cut would probably be quite similar to this one in its unfolding and narrative function.

Note that this type of narrative construction is not exclusive to *Gladiator II*. Something similar occurs in *300* (Dir. Zack Snyder, 2007). When the film introduces Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro), practically everything about him is effeminate and deviant: he wears golden body paint; shaved and repainted eyebrows; eyeliner; long, well-groomed nails; and multiple gold piercings, bracelets, and necklaces (Pierce, 2017: 243). In a scene, the Persian king,

positioned behind protagonist Leonidas (Gerard Butler), seductively places his hands on the Spartan's back. This scene is both erotic and threatening. For Pierce (2017: 244), this homoerotic moment generates a discomfort that is only possible due to the effeminate figure of Xerxes in this narrative (as in the scene in *Gladiator II* above). Perhaps Xerxes comes closest to Macrinus regarding depictions of deviant masculinity and sexuality. Although, in the case of the Persian character, these elements are exaggerated to the point of caricature. However, both start from the same premise and basis: an orientalizing representation. Both cases closely link effeminate character and non-normative sexual desire to Xerxes' and Macrinus' status as non-White, non-Western individuals. This clearly distinguishes them from the depiction of emperors Geta and Caracalla in that these same characteristics are dangerous but for another reason. As with Thraex, they become easy prey to the oriental element that is by its nature seen as destructive and decadent. This is important as it reveals a lot about the discourses these cinematic narratives produce. That is, if Rome is ruining itself due to the dissolution of the hegemonic masculinity represented by the two emperors, the real danger lies in the foreign, in the Eastern, which is portrayed as being able to corrupt the Roman social fabric but unable to realize its full potential, symbolized by Marcus Aurelius' "Roman dream," which his grandson Lucius takes up at the end of the film.

The conflict also manifests itself politically since in films such as *Gladiator II*, villains often transgress their masculine roles, disrupting the political order that, although idealized as democratic, maintains patriarchal structures. Pierce quotes Ina Rae Hark, who says that in these epic films about the Ancient World, "the rightful exercise of masculine power has been perverted by unmanly tyrants" (Pierce, 2011: 50). Resuming the parallel between *Gladiator II* and the 2020s US, the question arises about who is perceived as a threat and how this is solved. Although Ridley Scott has stated that Macrinus would be a kind of Donald Trump (The Hollywood Reporter, 2024), the director chose to represent him as a foreigner (immigrant), non-heterosexual, effeminate, and Black individual in his Roman version. Meanwhile, the protagonists and heroes try at all costs to "make Rome great again." Thus, Macrinus seems to align himself more with Trump's preferred targets than with the president, contrary to Scott's statement. This shows how Trump's permissive discourse deftly creates previously inexistent enemies based on very well-defined characteristics. The great scope of such discourse precisely stems from its basis on lasting historical constructions. Society and fictional narratives continue to reaffirm these constructions, making them extremely powerful and effective.

Final considerations

As Miskolci (2021) and Wittig (2025) argue, critically thinking about gender and sexuality implies acknowledging that the categories that define "normal" and "deviant" configure historical and political constructions. For historians, films that revisit the Roman past constitute a privileged material to analyze these constructions since it articulates concepts of masculinity, sexuality, and race in an audiovisual language that can translate ideals and social tensions of its moment of production. While the Roman past featured sexual practices that escape modern classifications, contemporary cinema recodes them in the light of heteronormativity and the prevailing morality, evincing the historical and cultural construction of sexuality.

In this context, *Gladiator II* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2024) shows a strong continuity with the representational models in 20th-century films: Lucius and Acacius, the protagonists, are constructed as bearers of heteronormative and masculinities sexualities. In contrast, the three main antagonists are associated with homoeroticism and/or counter-hegemonic gender performances: The film shows Caracalla and Geta with visual and gestural props that refer to effeminacy stereotypes, such as makeup and extravagant clothing, offering suggestions that the former has homoerotic relationships. On the other hand, Macrinus openly expresses desire for other men and is built from an Orientalist bias. The narrative associates these characteristics with negative traits, such as moral fragility, emotional instability, and excessive ambition. To a certain extent, these supposed character flaws are inscribed in the very bodies and appearances of these characters, becoming "visible" in their performances and modes of presentation.

The analyses in this study shows the persistence of narrative and visual strategies that associate sexual and gender dissidence with villainy in the Hollywood cinema about Antiquity. Despite apparent advances in the representation of sexual diversity in some recent productions, Ridley Scott's works reiterate a model that links homoerotic, incestuous, or performative "deviance" to negative character traits. In *Gladiator II*, this logic becomes even more explicit: White, virile, heterosexual masculinity is reaffirmed as the legitimate heir to the Western Roman legacy in contrast to a racialized and sexually deviant otherness. Thus, changes occur—rather than to the structure of the opposition—to the visual and political repertoire sustaining it, now crossed by contemporary tensions around gender, ethnic-racial, and national identities.

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