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Abstract

This paper examines the dystopian Italian science-fiction film *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* (Fulci, 1984), with a particular focus on the Battle of the Damned, a deadly televised contest in which condemned prisoners fight to the death in the reconstructed Colosseum in Rome. A consideration of this fictional game within the film's dystopian future Rome will open onto three intertwined lines of analysis: the classicist impulse to conceive of a continuity between imperial Rome and contemporary Italy, the adoption of this classicism in fascist Italy, and media consolidation in the context of neoliberalism and political corruption in the 1980s. By pursuing these lines of analysis, the paper will argue that Fulci's film functions as a critique of the national cultural moment from which it looks towards both Italy's past and future as a continuity of authoritarianism and oppression.

Keywords

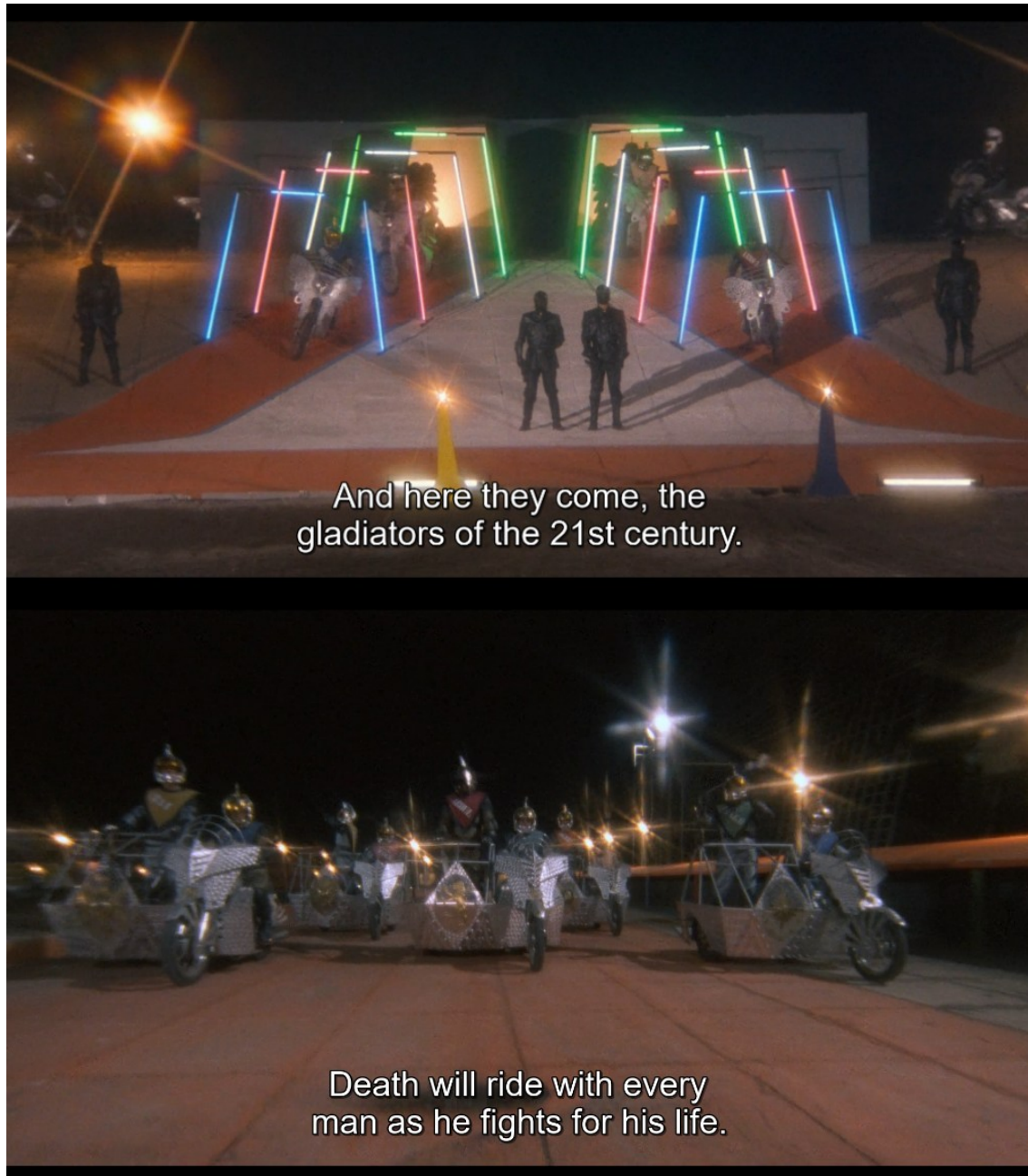
Lucio Fulci; Classicism; Rome; fascism; neoliberalism; dystopia

Under the bright glare of stadium lights, twenty men roar around the dirt of the arena on armoured motorbikes. They wield swords, flails, maces, lances, flamethrowers—all instruments of death are fair game.

We are in the New Colosseum of Rome in the year 2072, and we are watching the Battle of the Damned, a major event televised “live on all five continents in Glob-alvision” by the media conglomerate World Broadcasting Services (WBS) in a bid for global media domination over its rival, Seven Seas Intertelelevision. The twenty contestants—all condemned criminals facing death sentences—are fighting for a

chance to earn their life back, but there can only be one survivor: the Battle of the Damned is a fight to the death, with the game only ending when one contestant is the last man standing (see figures 1 and 2).

The game is played in two rounds. In the first round, each gladiator is on their own bike, and has to ride laps around the arena, staying within the lane and using any available means at their disposal—weapons, environmental features, their own bikes and bodies—to eliminate other gladiators. Once half of the contestants have



Figures 1 and 2. Scenes from the Battle of the Damned in *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*.

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been killed, the game moves on to the second round. The remaining ten gladiators are paired up on mechanized chariot-bikes—one driver, one rider wielding a weapon—and, again, attempt to take out other contestants in the effort to be the last man standing.

The scene, from Lucio Fulci's 1984 film *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* (*Warriors of the Year 2072*), is a familiar one. From big Hollywood studio productions like *Ben-Hur* (Wyler, 1959) to the *peplum* cycle of swords-and-sandals B-movies in the Italian film industry in the 1950s and 60s, the sight of dusty, blood-soaked contests in the circus or the gladiatorial arena was an established cinematic staple. Besides, the American films *Rollerball* (Jewison, 1975) and *Death Race 2000* (Bartel, 1975) had already provided cinematic visions of dystopian future societies of the spectacle in which technologically aided blood sports performed the function of *panem et circenses*. In this way, Fulci's film is typical of the cinematic landscape of Italian genre cinema in the 1970s and 80s, which, as Dana Renga points out, was largely based on the near-plagiaristic imitation of popular international films (2011, p. 246).

I guerrieri dell'anno 2072 takes its place in a cycle of dystopian or post-apocalyptic films produced in Italy in the early 1980s. Renga lists eighteen titles in this short-lived cycle, from *I nuovi barbari* (Castellari, 1982) to *Vendetta dal futuro* (Martino, 1985), which almost immediately followed the international success of *The Road Warrior* (Miller, 1981) and *Escape from New York* (Carpenter, 1981).

The films in this cycle, Renga argues, tend to be "critical of several factors that brought about other apocalypses of the twentieth century such as greed, authoritarianism, governmental corruption and industrial and scientific progress at the expense of human rights" (2011, p. 250). In the mode of popular entertainment, they reflect the anxieties of the Cold War and the Reagan years as well as the recent memory of fascism, the Second World War and post-war political turmoil in Italy. The sequence in *2019: Dopo la caduta di New York* (Martino, 1983) which features a scene of mass incarceration that explicitly recalls the concentration camps is a case in point.

I guerrieri dell'anno 2072 is no different, but, in key ways, it also stands apart from the other films in the cycle. Its dystopia does not take off from the premise of an impending nuclear war and civilizational collapse. Instead, it extrapolates the neoliberal West of the Reagan years some decades into the future, with their defining anxieties—unchecked corporate hegemonies, authoritarianism, economic deregulation, rampant consumerism, wealth inequality, and technological development in the service of all of these—taken to extremes. Just as significantly, while most of the other films in the cycle take place in a dystopian future United States—presumably with an eye to the international market—*I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* is the only film in the cycle to specifically depict a future Italy (Mendik, 2015, p. 215), a fact which invites a reading of it in a national context.

In this paper, then, I will venture forth from precisely this premise, and read the *Battle of the Damned*, and *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*, as a comment upon Italy in the early 1980s. I shall argue that Fulci's film maps out the concerns of a cultural moment when the memory and lingering traces of fascism intertwined with the neoliberal hegemony of a globalised media landscape, against the background of an enduring classicism by which contemporary Italy is understood and the heir and torchbearer of the imagined glory of imperial Rome.

Classicism and the face of dystopian Rome

The date in the film's title—2072—is a pointed one: the *Battle of the Damned* in the New Colosseum happens precisely two thousand years after construction of the Colosseum began under the reign of Vespasian in 72 CE.

The film insists on this direct line of connection between imperial Rome and the *Battle of the Damned*, a couple of millennia later. Hank Martinez, WBS announcer, introduces the televised broadcast with these words:

...the greatest extravaganza of mortal combat ever staged—the *Battle of the Damned*, an authentic reconstruction, with a few updated details, of the great gladiatorial combats of ancient Rome. Thrill as the Caesars did at the sight of condemned warriors fighting for their lives.

The idea of continuity between classical Rome and contemporary Italy is hardly a new one, or particular to the present moment—in fact, it has been put into the service of different political projects at just about every stage of Italy's history from the Middle Ages onwards. The Austrian art historian Alois Riegl noted the centrality of this idea in constituting a cultural and popular identity in the Italian Renaissance:

The idea that the Italians, after surviving the barbarian invasions, recovered their true identity, and with it an ancient art which had always been integral to them and which they continued, was undoubtedly a historical one. It assumes a notion of development which attributes to the Renaissance Italians, thanks to their very nationality, a kind of necessary and natural destiny which obliged them to assume the heritage of related cultures of antiquity. (1982, p. 28)

In both its republican and imperial manifestations, Rome has meant different things to different socio-historical moments. It has been valued as a model of martial strength, of imperial ambition, of monumentality, of political organization, of leadership, oratory and statecraft, and of scholarly and artistic achievement. Accordingly, this idea that the Italy, and Italians, of the present moment (whatever the present moment happens to be) are the rightful heirs of a classical legacy to be (re)claimed and borne as a torch into a bright promised future took on new shapes in the years of the *Risorgimento* in the late nineteenth century, when it was pressed

into the service of structuring an identity for a newly unified Italy—and the term *Risorgimento* is already indicative, framing the new Italian state as a resurgence of the lost classical glory that is its birthright. In the city of Rome, this idea took the shape of an architectural and urban planning project intended to remake the city as the secular capital of a nation that was new and forward-looking, but also founded upon its classical heritage.

This ‘third Rome’—following the Rome of the Caesars and the Rome of the popes, and incorporating both of them in its fabric—gained its most prominent architectural image in the form of the *Altare della Patria* (Altar of the Fatherland), the Monument to King Vittorio Emanuele II, first ruler of unified Italy. Constructed between 1885 and 1934, the monument’s position on the north slope of the Capitoline Hill and its neoclassical aspect, with its sweep of Corinthian columns and its invocation of the Forum Romanum, are both significant. It sets, in white Botticino limestone, the glory of the new Rome as the successor and heir of the classical Rome: “ancient imperial glory and the continual revival of Italian culture, first in the Renaissance and now in the *Risorgimento*, are compounded in every element of this work in service of the state” (Kirk, 2008, p. 44).

In *I guerrieri dell’anno 2072*, Fulci introduces his dystopian Rome with a remarkable aerial night-time tracking shot. Amidst a cityscape of glimmering neon skyscrapers, the camera finds first St. Peter’s Basilica and Piazza San Pietro, then the *Altare della Patria*, and, finally, the Colosseum itself (see figures 3–5). The three Romes—the Augustan Rome of the emperors, the Papal Rome as the seat of ecclesiastical authority, and the Rome of the *Risorgimento*, secular capital of a new Italy—are connected in the fluid continuity of the camera travelling across the cityscape. Yet they are all subsumed within the matrix of a fourth Rome, isolated monuments in the sprawl of a city of bright lights, flying cars and dense, high-rise construction: the neoliberal Rome of globalised corporate power and its attendant media hegemony. It is this Rome for which the Nuovo Colosseo, and the Battle of the Damned, serves as the crowning glory.



Figures 3–5. Images from the tracking shot introducing the Rome of 2072, showing, respectively, St. Peter's Basilica, the *Altare della Patria*, and the Colosseum. © Titanus

Imperial Rome and fascism

This third Rome would take a darker turn between the 1920s and the 1940s, with the rise to power of Benito Mussolini and the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*. In these years, the project of forging a modern imperial identity for Italy according to the model of Augustan Rome grew ever more prominent (Salvatori, 2014).

As the classicist and historian Luciano Canfora writes, “what is set in motion by fascism is the latest attempt to once again position classicism (in its Roman variant) *at the centre of a cultural politics* and even to make of it a mass ideology” (1976, p. 16). Among the characteristics of European classicism that Canfora argues were firmly established as “non-secondary” elements of fascism is “the *idea* of Rome (with its corollaries of ‘primacy,’ of ‘continuity,’ and of the ‘imperial mission’)” (1976, p. 19).¹ What is contained in the identification of the new Italy with imperial Rome, then, is the implication of the new Italy’s primacy over other nations by birthright, its status as a continuation of its classical heritage, and the duty of imperialism this places upon it.

Anna Notaro observes that, just as the *Risorgimento* sought to build the new Italy upon the foundation of its glorious Roman heritage, “the strong symbolic link between Fascism and Rome’s imperial past” was incorporated into Fascist architectural projects in the capital, with the aim being to elevate the forward-looking Fascist modernity of the new Italian empire by association with the Augustan heritage of which it was the heir: “as antiquity and modernity were celebrated alongside one another, in the same capital city spaces, Rome’s imperial identity came to be refracted onto the modern Italian state” (Notaro, 2000, p. 16; see also Cornell and Hjertman, 2014).

I guerrieri dell'anno 2072 establishes a number of visual parallels between the imagery of imperial Rome and the iconography of twentieth-century fascism. Most notable is its depiction of the Praetorian Guard, a squad of heavily armed enforcers tasked with ensuring, through the liberal exercise of torture and other forms of violence, that the contestants in the Battle of the Damned stay in line and do not attempt to escape in the run-up to the Battle, as well as making sure the rules of the game are followed once it starts.

Taking their name, of course, from the Roman emperors’ elite unit of bodyguards and spies, the Praetorian Guard in Fulci’s film are introduced riding their motorbikes through the deserted night-time streets of Rome, against the backdrop of some of the city’s most recognizable monuments—including, pointedly, the Mausoleum of

¹ “Quello messo in atto dal fascismo è l’ultimo tentativo di collocare ancora una volta il classicismo (nella sua variante romanolatrica) *al centro di una politica culturale* e di farne addirittura una ideologia di massa”; “l’*idea* di Roma (coi corollari del ‘primato,’ della ‘continuità,’ della ‘missione imperiale.” Translated from the Italian by the author.

Hadrian, or, as it was styled in the Papal Rome, Castell Sant' Angelo. At the same time, they wear thinly-veiled Nazi SS uniforms, complete with the silver death's head insignia on their service caps—an echo of the horrors of the twentieth century as clear as the invocation of the concentration camps in *2019—Dopo la Caduta di New York* (see figures 6 and 7).

Rather than the attempt to forge a connection between the imperial glory of Augustan Rome and the glory to come of a fascist Italy, Fulci's film implies a continuity of authoritarian violence and oppressive power: just as it was in the Roman Empire, so it will be in the dystopian future of 2072, marked by media hegemony and corporate control.



Figures 6 and 7. The Praetorian Guard, clad in Nazi iconography, and arriving in Rome against the backdrop of the Mausoleum of Hadrian. © Titanus

Media consolidation in the Berlusconi years

Between Mussolini’s Rome and WBS’s Rome of 2072, though, is the Rome of 1984, in which *I guerrieri dell’anno 2072* was made, and to whose citizens the film is presumably addressed.

In the Italian context, the early 1980s were the years which saw the consolidation of most of the nation’s media landscape in the hands of the tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, later Prime Minister. As Letitia Badan Palhares Knauer de Campos writes, Fulci’s depiction of a dystopian future in which vast, globalised corporate conglomerates hold sway over a hegemonized—and distinctly Americanised—media landscape of spectacular distraction and violent titillation would have looked familiar to a contemporary Italian audience, and the film can hardly be read as anything other than a rebuke:

[WBS’] initial monopoly over the international television circuit ... resonates with the Italian experience of seeing [Berlusconi] assume massive control over television, initially founded on the distribution of North American series and productions. The desire for success with the *Nuovo Colosseo*, in an attempt to completely transform the entertainment rules of dystopian Rome, equally retrace the steps of Berlusconi in his ample dominion over the production and distribution of cinema in the country. (2022, p. 31)²

Fulci was a lifelong, self-identified leftist. His genre films often contained scathing condemnations of the power structures of Italian society, from his exposés of the crimes of the Catholic church in *Beatrice Cenci* (1969) and *Non si sevizia un paperino* (1971) to his satire of the clandestine cabals and conspiracies that would later come to light in the Propaganda Due scandal in *All’onorevole piacciono le donne* (1972). Indeed, *I guerrieri dell’anno 2072* was produced and released in the years following the exposure of Propaganda Due, a Masonic lodge and secret society working towards a reactionary “Plan for Democratic Reform” of Italy whose aims included media consolidation, and whose members included not only Berlusconi and popular TV presenter Maurizio Costanzo, but also the owner and editor of the *Corriere della Sera*, Italy’s most-read newspaper.

² “Seu inicial monopólio do circuito internacional de televisão, com a Kill-Bike, reforça a experiência italiana em ver a Reteitalia assumindo massivamente o controle televisivo, que no princípio se fundava na divulgação de séries e produções norte-americanas. A gana por sucesso com o *Nuovo Colosseo*, numa tentativa de transformar por completo as diretrizes de entretenimento da Roma distópica, igualmente retrança os passos de Berlusconi em seu amplo domínio da produção e distribuição de cinema no país.” Translated from the Portuguese by the author.

It is unsurprising, then, that Fulci would be critical of the mass media and their consolidation in the hands of one of the country's richest and most powerful men. In an interview with Michele Romagnoli, he said:

And we do not know it, but we find ourselves constantly in front of the Orwellian Big Brother: which is *Beautiful* and all the soap operas in general, the football championship (I can't do without it), and everything else that gets chewed up and moulded by the networks (by now even state TV is one), most of all the films broken up with advertising. And after the honey of familiar transmissions, they hit us in the face with a televised news story as a real and proper spectacle of the suffering of others. (Fulci quoted in Romagnoli, 2014, p. 34)³

It is hard to miss this cynicism regarding the consolidated and hegemonized mass media in *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*. A recurring visual trope in the film, explicable only as a typically Fulci piece of on-the-nose symbolism—and perhaps a slyly self-referential one for the so-called Godfather of Gore—sees TV broadcasts fading in with a spill of scarlet blood down a white screen (see figure 8). Indeed, televised violence appears pervasive. In the film's opening sequences, we witness something of a metagame to balance the scales of power: a ratings battle between two competing TV game shows of gruesome violence, Seven Seas Intertelelevision's Kill-Bike and WBS' The Danger Game. The Battle of the Damned is introduced precisely as a strategic move within this metagame: a play by WBS to counter Seven Seas Intertelelevision's ratings dominance, steal away Drake (Jared Martin), the reigning Kill-Bike champion, and assert dominance over the global media landscape.

Of course, this also constitutes another form of continuity between the Battle of the Damned in the *Nuovo Colosseo* and the bloody spectacles the Flavian Amphitheatre was erected to host: that of *panem et circenses*. Mary Beard has pointed out that the funding of gladiatorial games and other lavish mass entertainments was a key element of Augustus' imperial largesse, a demonstration of his wealth and generosity to the people of Rome (2015, p. 365)—or, as Johan Huizinga puts it, in his perfunctory dismissal of the play element in the gladiatorial games of Rome, these games represented “mere alms-giving on a gigantic scale to a miserable proletariat” (1950, p. 177).

³ “E noi non lo sappiamo, ma ci troviamo costantemente di fronte al Grande Fratello orwelliano: che è *Beautiful* e tutte le soap opera in genere, il campionato di calcio (non riesco a farne senza) e tutto il resto che viene triturato (e plasmato) dai network (oramai anche la TV di stato lo è), per primi i film spaccati dalla pubblicità. E dopo il miele delle trasmissioni familiari, ci sbattono in faccia un concetto telegiornale come un vero e proprio spettacolo sulle sofferenze altrui.” Translated from the Italian by the author.



Figure 8. The spill of blood introducing TV broadcasts. © Titanus

Resistance in (and through) the game

And yet, within the dystopian milieu of *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*, Fulci also locates a faint note of hope in the possibility of resistance.

In their book on fictional games, Stefano Gualeni and Riccardo Fassone describe an established narrative pattern: in the context of a dystopian society organised around the spectacle of a life-or-death game, we encounter “a resolute protagonist who imagines or creates a better future for themselves and others by rebelling against the inhumane rules of a game” (2023, p. 104). The arc the protagonist, Drake, goes through is nearly identical to the one Gualeni and Fassone describe for the protagonist of Stephen King’s 1982 novel *The Running Man* and its film adaptation (Glaser, 1987), mapping a “transition from aiming to be competent players—and thus to potentially defeat the state—to stepping outside the game completely, symbolically denying its (and the state’s) authority” (Gualeni and Fassone 2023, p. 105). It is also a plot that anticipates that of more recent, popular fictional games in dystopian fiction, with *The Hunger Games* franchise as arguably the most prominent example of the trope.

Drake begins the film as a Kill-Bike champion. Whether his participation in the deadly game is enthusiastic or dutiful, his prowess and his success have brought him material rewards and status: he is a globally known media celebrity, with a beautiful wife and an expensive house. However, following his being framed for the killing of the apparent home invaders who murder his wife, and his unwilling co-option as a contestant in the Battle of the Damned, Drake appears to show no desire to kill.

During his training in the runup to the Battle, Drake proves immune to the psychological manipulation and indoctrination aimed at unlocking his violent tendencies. Again and again, when pitted against his fellow gladiators-in-training, he chooses mercy, non-violence, and covert cooperation against the rules policed by the Praetorian Guard.

This finds its ultimate manifestation during the Battle of the Damned itself. Though Drake plays along with the rules at first, surviving long enough to proceed to the second round, he deviates at the first opportunity. When Abdul (Fred Williamson) is thrown off his chariot after his driving partner is killed, Drake, rather than going for an easy kill, pulls up and invites him onto his own chariot. Convincing the other gladiators to join him in his rebellion, they abandon the game and turn instead on the Praetorian Guard, chasing down and killing their commander, Raven (Howard Ross) before storming WBS corporate headquarters (see figures 9 and 10).



Figures 9 and 10. Drake showing Abdul a gesture of mercy, and the gladiators cooperating to turn on the Praetorian Guard. © Titanus

It is not just this turning of the tables, though, that constitutes a radical act of resistance within, and against, the game and the power it symbolizes. Instead, the true element of counterplay (Meades, 2015) or transgressive play (Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2020) that undermines the Battle of the Damned is the eventual refusal, by the contestants, of the imperative to compete against each other. As Drake tells the WBS executive Sarah (Eleonora Brigliadori) during his attempted induction, “you’re in the hate business, Sarah, and I don’t understand why you don’t let anyone show mercy on worldwide TV”. It’s not just that the televised spectacle needs the contestants to fight in order for the show to go on. What is at stake is the mediated image of a particular model of citizenship: one which intertwines the valorisation of martial strength, normatively-gendered masculine aggression and competitive impulse distinctive of fascism⁴ with the neoliberal mobilization of a simplistic picture of *homo economicus* motivated only by calculated and uncaring self-interest (Urbina and Ruiz-Villaverde, 2014). During the broadcast of the Battle of the Damned, the ideology of strength and competition is reiterated, couched in a familiar Darwinian discourse of biological essentialism. As gladiators die at the hands of their fellow contestants, the announcer intones: “The weakest fall to the strongest as the relentless process of natural selection takes its course”.

Drake’s actions undermine the mass-mediated projection of this Fascist-neoliberal subjectivity, initially through an act of mercy, and, in the next step, through active cooperation of the oppressed against the oppressor. The idea that everyone is in it for themselves is abandoned, and the realization of their shared plight becomes apparent.

Given the overt and extended parallel the film draws between its dystopian blood sport and the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome, it is perhaps unsurprising that a thread of Christian imagery runs through the film, associated with this resistance towards this imperative of violence, strength and competition.

The association of the Colosseum with Christian martyrdom is almost as old as its invocation as a monument to the enduring glory of Augustan Rome. Indeed, in the Papal Rome, the Colosseum was a site of pilgrimage. Pope Benedict XVI’s intervention in the late eighteenth century substantially established a cult of the supposed Christian martyrs of the gladiatorial games, and his installation of the twelve Stations of the Cross around the circumference of the ruined arena enshrined it as a site of devotional significance to Christian visitors to the Eternal City.

⁴ It is indicative—and representative of another vein of classicism in the fascist project—that Mussolini sought to bring the Olympics to Rome.

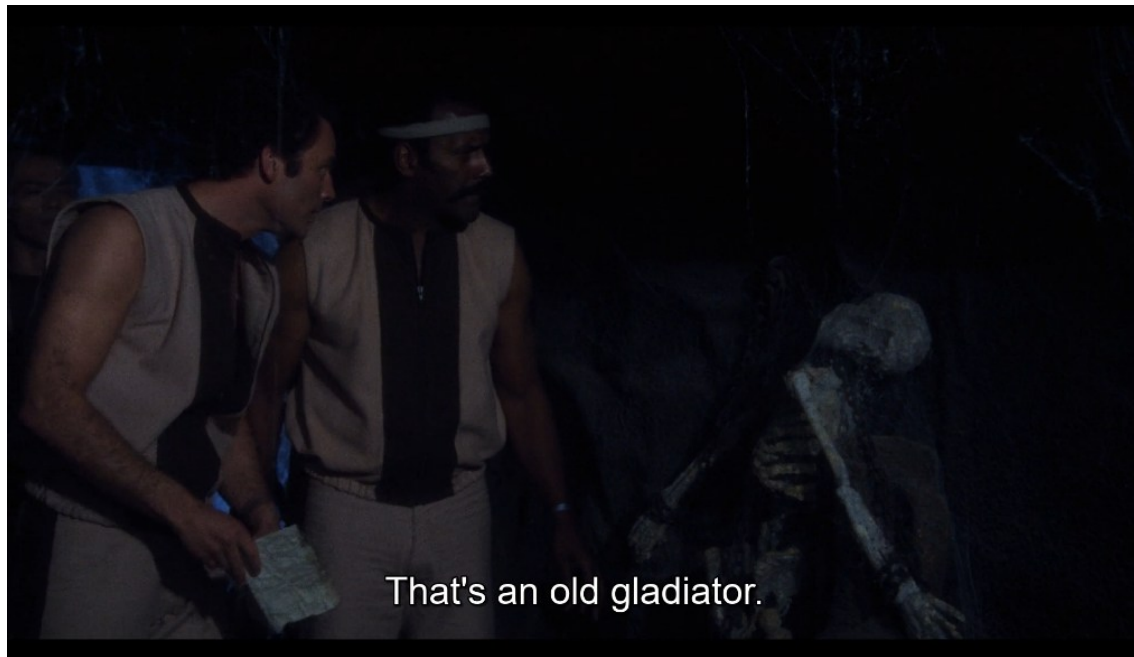


Figure 11. The gladiators of the twenty-first century meeting the gladiators of the first century. © Titanus

In a subtle but sustained manner, *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072* weaves this thread through its depiction of the dystopian game. At the film's midpoint, the gladiators-in-training attempt to escape their cells through the catacombs beneath the streets of Rome. Coming upon the interred remains of ancient bodies left to rest in that subterranean darkness, they experience a moment of recognition. The new gladiators have come face-to-face with the old, establishing an identity between the martyrs of Rome and the sacrificial victims of the corporate regime of 2072 (see figure 11). Later in the film when Sarah, who has begun to have doubts about WBS's ethics, seeks insight into the corporation's true aims, it is into the shadowy depths of a seemingly abandoned church that she ventures, on the trail of a figure whose doubts had similarly led him to leave the corporate fold.

Yet the most striking Christian image occurs when, following the failure of their escape attempt, the gladiators are punished by being forced to hang by their arms from metal bars over an electrified floor for twelve minutes. The framing of Drake in between two of his condemned adversaries as they all hang from the bars already visually and thematically recalls the crucifixion of Christ. This gains an additional dimension after one of the gladiators, Kirk (Al Cliver), unable to hold on any longer, falls to the floor. As he writhes in pain on the floor, Drake and Abdul exhort him to reach up to them. Together, they support his weight (see figure 12).



Figure 12. Drake and Abdul supporting Kirk as they hang over the electrified floor.
© Titanus

This thread of Christian imagery might be surprising in the light of the anti-clericalism Fulci had displayed in earlier films; however, it can also be interpreted as being of a part with the more spiritually hopeful turn of his late-career films (Rogerson, 2025)—or, alternatively, to Fulci identifying an image of political and existential resistance in early, pre-institutionalised Christianity as an oppositional force within imperial Rome, before its co-option within the ideological apparatus of imperialism.

Conclusions

The Battle of the Damned in *I guerrieri dell'anno 2072*, then, functions as a playground upon which an intricately intermeshed set of concerns is set in motion—the classicism and the “idea of Rome” that is a persistent element in Italian national identity, fascism, media consolidation, and neoliberalism, all coalescing as a critique of the Italian media landscape—and broader cultural moment—of the early 1980s.

In the framing of this globally televised, corporate-controlled spectacle of violence as a dystopian future continuation of the legacy of Augustan Rome, Fulci projects a satirical vision of the continuity that has, in different historical moments, so often been vaunted as a pillar of Italian national identity. It's true, Fulci's film seems to say: Italy has always been Augustan Rome, and will continue to be so in the future—a society of cruel spectacle, authoritarian oppression, political conspiracy, corruption, and wealth inequality. Pointedly, it paints a picture of the Italy of 1984—and, more broadly, of the West with which the country was politically and culturally aligned—as a globalised system of power which, through its manipulation of the media, could make playthings of its citizens—even if, in the end, there emerges the possibility of

resistance through the refusal to play by the rules of the game, and the imagining of a different future.

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