

Greeks and gladiators battle Gospel at box office

Son of God; Noah; Exodus; and Mary, Mother of Christ. While many Bible movies are scheduled this year, there are also plenty of films highlighting pagan antiquity.

Already have *Pompeii* and *300: Rise of an Empire* stormed the theatres, transporting us back to ancient Greek and Roman times. *Pompeii*, about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D., is a much better movie than *Rise of an Empire*. It takes all the best features of a classic disaster movie spectacle and refracts them through the sensibility of a Roman tragedy, inviting the audience to consider epic themes of divine providence and merciful compassion toward suffering victims.

After three weeks, the well-crafted and entertaining *Pompeii* has only earned \$21 million in the United States and Canada. By contrast, *Rise of an Empire*, a gruesomely explicit violent spectacle that mythically distorts beyond all recognition the historical battles of Marathon, Artemisium, and Salamis (490-480 B.C.), has earned an estimated \$45 million at the domestic box office on its opening weekend alone.

While they cost roughly the same, *Pompeii* will have to work harder to make back its reported \$100 million budget. *Pompeii* has a good story with fine characters that at least offers a thoughtful reflection on the meaning of human life. Far more worthy of your patronage, it is far removed from the disgusting spectacle of *300: Rise of an Empire*.

But people will probably lump both movies together, as being of the same "action movie" or "historical drama" genre. Yet *300: Rise of an Empire* is unusually violent, in a way that aims solely at satisfying the basest appetites for graphic cruelty. *Pompeii*, by contrast, philosophically focuses on its theme of the structural injustice of pagan cruelty as visited upon underserving innocents.

Even if *300: Rise of an Empire*'s opening numbers seem to predict that it will

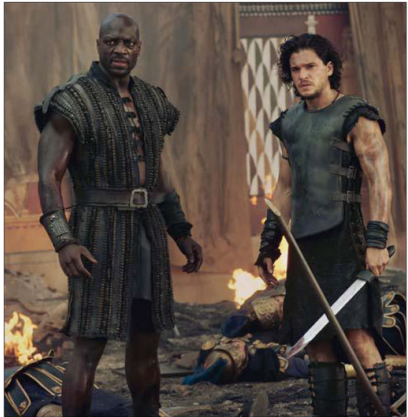


Global Theatre
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fail to match the box office success of *300* (its predecessor from 2007 which earned over \$456 million in 18 weeks), it is disturbing that *300*'s successor is still much more successful than *Pom-*

is the struggle against these natural propensities," writes professor Thomas F. Bertonneau of the State University of New York at Oswego, in a study applying the work on violence of the great Catholic thinker Rene Girard to current cinema.

"What the people who visit the theater or rent the discs to see such movies are saying is that they like to observe the



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Adewele Akinnouye-Agbaje and Kit Harington star in a scene from the movie *Pompeii*.

peii. Consider that *300: Rise of an Empire* even serves up explicit sexual violence for audience entertainment. How can the most violent cruelty attract such a bigger audience at the box office?

"The Romans had gladiatorial displays and public mass executions. René Girard explains the function of these barbaric usages: They produce unanimity at the expense of the victim; they resolidify the fragile community, and they discharge on the scapegoat anger and frustration that would otherwise need to circulate destructively within the group. One of the struggles associated with the dissemination of the Gospel

torture and murder of human beings. And what this propensity tells us is that millions of young people have grown up without internalizing the Gospel condemnation against cruelty," observes Bertonneau.

St. Augustine of Hippo tells the story of how in his youth, a close friend of his, Alypius, had to fight against the powerful attraction to gladiatorial spectacles he liked to indulge. Although Alypius eventually became disgusted with his appetite for these violent games, nonetheless he was one day dragged back to the arena by his old gang
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Box office madness afflicts many

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of friends and law-school buddies.

Augustine describes how once Alypius arrived there he tried not to give in to the temptation to watch. The roar of the crowd, however, eventually wore down his resistance and made him open his eyes. Augustine vividly describes the contagious madness of crowd behavior:

“As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness. Without any awareness of what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure. He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him. What should I add? He looked, he yelled, he was on fire, he took the madness home with him so that it urged him to return not only with those by whom he had originally been drawn there, but even more than them, taking others with him.” (*Confessions* VI.viii.13)

The same madness afflicts us today. This is Sparta; this is box office.

Alypius eventually became a bishop and a saint, like his good friend Augustine. What do you think both of them would advise us to give up for Lent?

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