

Violent Identity: The Coliseum and the Narrative of Death

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Abstract

Gladiatorial games played an important role in maintaining the cohesion of Roman Society. This role was fully understood by the Roman elites who extended large portions of the state resources towards building and maintaining a network of amphitheaters throughout the Mediterranean regions. In this essay we examine the role of collective violence, its transformation into ritualistic-aesthetic activity in Roman circuses, its uses by the Empire to form collective identity and maintain internal peace.

Keyword:

Roman Republic; Roman Empire; Roman Circus; Gladiatorial Games; René Girard; Collective Violence; Collective Identity.

Introduction

Collective violence is an inter-individual mechanism through which a given culture reinforces its identity in times of crisis and reaffirms its interpretation of reality by recreating the consensus among its members against a defined individual or group of individuals. Historically, the occurrence of collective violence was accompanied by the use of artistic elements. Through a study of the Roman Empire this essay will attempt to suggest a larger explanation of the function of art within the social order and how it is related to the occurrences of collective violence. The essay is thus mainly concerned with the relation between social order, collective violence and art. It will ask and attempt to answer a single question: what is the role of collective violence in the disintegration, reformation and maintenance of the Roman Empire's social order?

A cursory historical look at events of collective violence shows that aesthetization of violence - largely through artistic productions organized into identitarian narratives - played a fundamental role in their justification and perpetuation. But why does the transformation of violence into artistic activity play such an important role in the occurrence and organization of collective violence? What is it in the nature of certain artistic activities that makes this role not only compatible with, but also seemingly necessary to the perpetuation of collective violence?

The answer to these questions is organized by a unified theoretical description of the larger contextual group of events which contains those studied.

This organization is provided by the mimetic theory of cultural formation. What the theory proposes is that societies going through the occurrence of collective violence create their own self-defining limits. The process of unified collective violence itself is one where a society is fundamentally defining itself through the violent creation of an “other”. Such a self-definition is based on an identitarian narrative that organizes the selection of facts, using elements of reality which reinforce its interpretation and more or less ignore or oppose those that don't.

The construction and use of the Coliseum contributed to such narrative construction of identity. The social, political and identitarian crises Rome was going through made the construction of the Flavian Amphitheater necessary. Its form is determined by its function; the structuring of social behavior towards a reconstruction of Roman identity.

A Brief History of the Colosseum

The architecture of the Flavian Amphitheater, also known as the Coliseum, was the means through which roman society structured behaviors of mass murder into identitarian narratives and artistic activity. The history of its construction shows the underlying social and political instability which made the creation of this space of death-as-spectacle necessary.

One of the main event leading to the building of the Colosseum

was the Great Fire of Rome in AD 64, which destroyed about two thirds of Rome. Among the buildings destroyed was emperor Nero's imperial palace, The Domus Transitoria. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, rumors started circulating that Nero had ordered the fire. These were not quelled by his attempts at public relations: “(...) all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order.”²⁹

As a means of redirecting guilt away from himself, Nero chose a group of sacrificial victims:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.³⁰

His consequent treatment of Christians shows the propensity of Romans to thermalize punishment: “Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.”³¹

This redirection of accusations and popular rage towards the Christians apparently gave Nero enough popularity to safely mingle “with the people in the dress of a charioteer or [standing] aloft on a car.”³² Nero's return to popularity was short-lived. He decided to build a new palace on a huge plot of the city of Rome that has been destroyed by the fire. Domus Aurea or The Golden House was a huge complex of unmatched luxury.

As Suetonius describes it:

Its size and splendour will be sufficiently indicated by the following details. Its vestibule was large enough to contain a colossal statue of the emperor a hundred and twenty feet high; and it was so extensive that it had a triple colonnade a mile long. There was a pond too, like a sea, surrounded with buildings to represent cities, besides tracts of country, varied by tilled fields, vineyards, pastures and woods, with great numbers of wild and domestic animals. In the rest of the house all parts were overlaid with gold and adorned with gems and mother-of-pearl. There were dining-rooms with fretted ceilings of ivory, whose panels could turn and shower down flowers and were fitted with pipes for sprinkling the guests with perfumes. The main banquet hall was circular and constantly revolved day and night, like the heavens. He had baths supplied with sea water and sulphur water.³³

In view of its extraordinary luxury and its location on destroyed parts of the city this was a very unpopular project that fed the accusations that the fire was ordered. Nero's unpopularity and growing rumors of revolution pushed the emperor to institute a period of terror, ordering the elimination of any potentially dangerous opposition. Revolts by Vindex the governor of Gallia Lugdunensis and Galba the governor of Hispania, followed by revolt of the Pretorian Gards and a trial in absentia by the Senate eventually forced Nero to commit suicide in AD 68.

The period following Nero's suicide was one of civil war. During the so-called Year of the Four Emperors, a succession of three emperors, Galba, Otho and Vitellius, met with violent death. The war ended when the victorious Vespasian was declared emperor in AD 69.

The new emperor had inherited a fragmented empire. The construction of the Coliseum which he ordered in AD 70 was a strong populist message of both stability and virtue. Built on the site of the artificial lake of Nero's Golden House, it was a signal by Vespasian that land appropriated by Nero after the fire was to be returned to the Roman people. It was inaugurated by the emperor in AD 79 when not yet completed and eventually finished by his son, the Emperor Titus in AD 80.

The Roman Empire extended enormous resources for the building of the Coliseum. Nero's artificial lake needed to be dried and replaced by a ring of cement and crushed stone to serve as foundation upon which one meter high travertine block were placed. Upon the travertine and anchored with molten metal, stone blocks were placed to form the bases of the pillars and arches and walls.

Vespasian was not a man to waste resources. A brilliant general, he understood the limitation of resources and the importance of their judiciously strategic use. The amount of labor and materials that were extended to the building of the Coliseum indicate the importance attached to this structure by the emperor: 653,000 tons of cement, 295,000 tons of travertine, 54,000 tons of volcanic rock, 58,000 tons of bricks, 6000 tons of marble and 300 tons of metal. All in all, a total of one million tons were moved and manipulated of which 90% are in the foundations of the Coliseum.³⁴ This extension of resources implies an extension of the most fundamental and limited resource of any civilization: energy.

The foundational level of any civilizations, its very condition of possibility, is the amount of surplus energy it can extract from its environment. The availability of said energy represents the envelope and limitation of a civilization's social complexity and potential development. Pre-industrial civilizations were almost entirely based on solar energy, which powered photosynthesis, allowing for growth of agriculture used to feed the human and animal labor subsequently used for the construction of monuments such as the Coliseum. Simply put, without the transformation of solar into biological energy, no labor was possible. This amount of biological energy is finite given that agricultural surfaces are limited.³⁵ And while it is true that Vespasian used the loot of his military campaigns to finance the Coliseum, money was - and still is - only a symbol of available energy, allowing for its exchange into work and into the product of work.³⁶ Thus to fully understand the cost of the Coliseum one must understand how many units of energy were spent by the Roman Empire for its construction.

Dixon estimated the expenses directly related to the Coliseums at 44 billion kilocalories; 34 billion for animals transporting the building materials (3/4 energy) and 10 billion kilocalories for the workers. Thus over a period of 5 years, possibly the most active in the construction of the structure, 55 square kilometers of agricultural land were needed per year for a total of 275 square kilometers. Today, the archeological remains of about 230 Roman amphitheaters are still found in the Mediterranean area. The building and running of this network of amphitheaters thus represented a sizable portion of the energy surplus of the Roman Empire, a pre-industrial society where a large portion of the population lived at the limits of malnutrition. This surplus was also necessary for the maintenance of a highly complex military and administrative structure. So why did the Roman Empire invest so much of its energy surplus on building, running and maintaining its large network of amphitheaters?

To understand this we must understand the role of the circus and especially that of the Gladiatorial games. While the event occurring in the circus included chariot races, executions of criminals and theater, gladiatorial games summarized the function of the amphitheaters as the structuring of behaviors in view of a ritualization of collective violence forming and maintaining identity.

The origins of gladiatorial games are historically undetermined. However, Hopkins notes that “repeated evidence confirms the close association of gladiatorial contests with funerals.”³⁷ This is supported by the early Christian writer Tertullian (c. 155 – 240 A.D.) who writes: “because it was believed that the souls of the departed are propitiated with human blood, [the ancients] used to sacrifice captives or slaves of little value at funerals.”³⁸ The first documented instance is in 264 BCE. Decimus Junius Brutus and his brother Marcus organized a gladiatorial combat between three pairs of slave in honor of their deceased father, Junius Brutus Pera.³⁹ Thus, originally gladiatorial games was a form of human sacrifice to the spirit of the dead.

While originally of religious significance, the organization of such slave sacrifice took increasingly political objectives. This led to a rapid spread of this funerary practice among elite circles. Thus, as Futrell shows: “The munera continue to appear sporadically in the literary sources, revealing great advances in terms of scale and, presumably, elaborateness of production. From twenty-two pairs at the Aemelian games, to twenty-five pairs at the funeral of M. Valerius Laevinus in 200, to sixty pairs in 183 and seventy-four pairs in 174, the numbers involved increased consistently.”

The context of this upsurge is the increased political competition between members of the Roman elites. Gladiatorial games were used to gain prestige and political power. The increase in their frequency and elaborateness spiked towards the end of Roman Republic with the increasingly fierce political competition between Roman elites. Within that politically competitive context the original funerary association of gladiatorial events became less important. Its instrumentalization as a means of gaining popularity and prestige became paramount. When recently dead relatives were unavailable other had to be - metaphorically - dug-up and Munera were often postponed to be held in more politically advantageous periods. Thus, a Julius Caesar would hold games in honor of his daughter in 45 B.C. eight years after her death.⁴⁰ As Gerner writes: “The munera had much to offer as an implement of public persuasion, and one could not count on a death occurring at the optimal moment. The temporal connection between the death of a noted individual and the production of munera was therefore stretched quite thin.”⁴¹

While some fragments of religious symbolism remained associated with gladiatorial games, such as men dressed as the god Mercury testing and insuring that a Gladiator is dead, the evolution of the games moved towards increased theatricality. Such theatricalisation however is an evolution of the ritualization of human sacrifice and behaviors associated with it, not a move away from it. It could be stated that characteristics of ritualization such as formalization, repetition, exaggeration and elaboration are the very traits of theater as an artistic activity. The passage from ritualization to artistic activity is a continuum; a passage from an aesthetic of presence, that of the divinity, to one of narrative and representation, i.e.

Commemoration of presence; from the event itself towards an increased awareness of current events as commemorations and symbolization of previous ones.

A Mimetic Reading of Gladiatorial Games

If gladiatorial games are to be understood as forms of human sacrifice, René Girard's theory allows for an analysis of their role within Roman Society. Girard's mimetic theory proposes the social order as a result of a Hobbesian state of the war of all against all springing from mimetic desire⁴². Both Hobbes⁴³ and Girard⁴⁴ hold that the desire for the same objects leads to violence. Girard's innovation is his introduction of the notion that human desire is fundamentally mimetic. He demonstrated the ability of mimetic desire to cause undifferentiation in the form of generalized Hobbesian violence and differentiated complexity in the form of human culture.

Mimetic desire essentially means that beyond a certain biological level we desire what others desire. This leads to the proposition that a group of individuals desiring the same object will become mutual obstacles to its possession⁴⁵. This can potentially lead to a symmetrical escalation of violence among them where every violence given is returned with more intensity - a feedback loop. At its paroxysm the object of contention will lose its importance and the antagonists become violently fascinated with each other (1978, p. 416)⁴⁶. In this state the differentiations that stabilize society and explain the world in relation to it are undifferentiated.

From mimesis of desire arises mimesis of violence, and as violence increases so does the mimesis. At a certain degree of mimetic intensity combatants imitate each other in their opposition to a single individual. The Hobbesian war of all against all will become the war of all against one. That arbitrarily chosen individual will be charged and killed by the whole group, which will construct or reconstruct its unanimity in opposition to him⁴⁷. Following the period of crisis, the killed individual will be perceived as the one responsible for the causation and, through his death, as the cause of the cessation of the crisis. The stability of the inter-individual relations will be established in opposition to that crisis and the social order will be stabilized in opposition to a violence of all against all⁴⁸.

Human sacrifices is a controlled and predictable way to recreate this mechanism of crisis resolution; it establishes a well-contained crisis narratively leading to a predetermined resolution in unified consensus against a victim. Within a single society, occurrences of human sacrifice do not need to possess the same narratives but they does need to produce the same behaviors. Thus, while the narrative underlying the gladiatorial games as funerary rite almost disappeared with the rise of the Roman Empire, the consensus-building behaviors of collective violence underlying it remained stable: a period of crisis represented by the combat itself and the crowd's vicarious engagements with it, is followed by a period of unified consensus-building vicarious violence against a victim, i.e. the defeat and frequent death of a gladiator.

Political Use of the Games

Collective identity is the foundation of politics. Any successful political act needs an identitarian consensus underlying it. Politicians can thus be understood as people who build consensus around a given social order as a condition of possibility for collective projects. The use of gladiatorial games to create consensus was very well understood by roman politicians.

As part of his drive to centralize power, the emperor Augustus took control of the games and heavily regulated them. Privately organized games were a potential for rivals to gain prestige and challenge his power. Thus, “without banning privately sponsored gladiatorial games outright, he [Augustus] curbed the potential for senators to use this means to capture a popular following: senatorial permission was to be required for all such events; nobody was to hold more than two per annum; and the number of gladiators to be displayed was capped at 120.”⁴⁹

In roman society, public punishment of criminal was a means of imposing control through example. Rome had a population with high levels of unemployment and crime. The roman state responded to unemployment with free distribution of food and to crime with the theatralisation of punishment and violence. The circus also played a role in controlling violence.

It was a means of recreating a roman consensus constantly threatened by potential mimetic violence. This was fully understood by the roman elites. In his correspondence, Fronto (c.100 – 160 A.D.) directly relates circus games to internal peace within the empire:

For the rest, whether Trajan is to be accounted more illustrious in war or peace for my part I leave undecided, only pointing out that even Spartacus and Viriathus had considerable ability in war, whereas for the arts of peace scarcely anyone has excelled if indeed anyone has equaled Trajan in popularity with the people. These very things are they not in the highest degree torches to these detractions? They seem to be based on the loftiest principles of political wisdom, that the Emperor did not neglect even actors and the other performers of the stage, the circus, or the amphitheater, knowing as he did that the Roman People are held fast by two things above all, the corn-dole and the shows, that the success of a government depends on amusements as much as more serious things; neglect of serious matters entails the greater loss, neglect of amusements the greater discontent; food-largess is a weaker incentive than shows; by largesse of food only the proletariat on the corn-register are conciliated singly and individually, whereas by the shows the whole populace is kept in good humor.⁵⁰

A roman addiction to spectacles meant that the popularity of an emperor was directly related to the quality of the games he offered the people. The games' hold on the population and the frenetic agitation they created in its public is captured in the writings of Saint Augustine, who describes his friend Alypius' futile resistance to their temptation. While fully opposed to the games Alypius was dragged by his friends to the circus. He attempted to resist viewing the spectacle by closing his eyes:

When they got to the arena, and had taken what seats they could get, the whole place became a tumult of inhuman frenzy. But Alypius kept his eyes closed and forbade his mind to roam abroad after such wickedness. Would that he had shut his ears also! For when one of the combatants fell in the fight, a mighty cry from the whole audience stirred him so strongly that, overcome by curiosity and still prepared (as he thought) to despise and rise superior to it no matter what it was, he opened his eyes and was struck with a deeper wound in his soul than the victim whom he desired to see had been in his body.

Thus he fell more miserably than the one whose fall had raised that mighty clamor which had entered through his ears and unlocked his eyes to make way for the wounding and beating down of his soul, which was more audacious than truly valiant--also it was weaker because it presumed on its own strength when it ought to have depended on Thee. For, as soon as he saw the blood, he drank in with it a savage temper, and he did not turn away, but fixed his eyes on the bloody pastime, unwittingly drinking in the madness--delighted with the wicked contest and drunk with blood lust. He was now no longer the same man who came in, but was one of the mobs he came into, a true companion of those who had brought him thither.⁵¹

This unified explosion of enthusiasm and jubilation described by Saint Augustine is against the defeated gladiator. The mimetic pressure or the screaming crowds was so great it dragged the pious and initially resistant Alypius along with it. Through the crowd's mutual mimetic pressures, the games created a primary consensus around a collective act of violence. This was aided by the circularity of the Coliseum. What it allowed was increased mimesis, as every citizen was able to not only see the arena but all other citizens looking at the arena and to be thus mimetically influenced by the nature of their reactions. Mutual observation allowed waves of reactions to be transmitted mimetically creating unified collective reactions to the arena events. Thus the architecture of the Coliseum organized seating in a way to produce in the Roman population unified opposition to a collective enemy.

This unity against a common enemy was supported by an identitarian narrative based on the choice of victims in the arena. Thus, "As Rome's frontiers expanded, displays of foreign beasts were added (to symbolize foreign enemies and lands), and later large numbers of prisoners displayed and killed directly at Rome."⁵² The crowd is thus symbolically and narratively placed in opposition to a designated enemy.

To this consensus Roman elites attached another, that of a collective acceptance of the hierarchical nature of the political order. This manifests in the hierarchical organization of the seating arrangement in the Flavian Amphitheater which acts as a self-representation of Roman society.

Among the regulation of Augustus were laws that determined how different classes of the Roman Empire should be seated during the games:

The full complexity of the social distinctions laid down in the Lex Iulia Theatralis became permanently enshrined in the seating plan of the Colosseum. Like all amphitheatres, it was planned to keep the different classes of spectators separated. They had different entrances and seats in the cavea. The entrance on the north side seems to have been connected with the Esquiline by a porticus. A wide passage led directly from this entrance to the imperial box (pulvinar) on the podium. A corresponding box on the opposite side of the podium was probably reserved for the Praefectus Urbi. The entrances at the ends of the major axis led directly into the arena.⁵³

Closest to the arena floor was the podium of the Emperor. Senators were seated on the front rows. Above them knights and high class citizens. Above these in decreasing hierarchical order, married men, boys and non-citizens. Thus, the seating arrangement in the Amphitheater was not only a reflection of a given social order, but more importantly, a means of producing a consensus around this order through unanimous collective violence. In that sense the cohesion created an identitarian, consensus-building narrative; not only Romans unified against an enemy but Roman society in its hierarchical structure acting in a unified manner. Thus unity against the enemy also became unity around Roman hierarchy. This narrative underlies the formation and maintenance of Roman identity.

However, the efficiency of these games was limited. The increased economical strains on the Roman Empire and its eventual collapse during the fifth century ended these inhuman events. The expense of the gladiatorial games made them impossible to sustain.⁵⁴ Their condition of possibility was the highly complex society which they acted to maintain. Once the complexity of the Roman Empire's structures collapsed, they thankfully disappeared with it.

The Gladiatorial games, as theatricalization of violence, are only one example of a link between the formation and maintenance of a given society through violence and the control of that violence through artistic ritualization.

If, as we hypothesize, this relation between art, collective violence and the social order is a universal of human societies, the mimetic theory would allow us to understand different art forms and different social orders throughout history as different occurrences of a single universal inter-individual mechanism. This is not cultural diffusionism, but a hypothesis that different cultures are different applications of the same underlying human mechanism adapting to differing circumstances.

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