Popular Entertainment in Rome and its Modern Day Counterparts

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Introduction

Entertainment in every single society will always play a vital role, not only in the community but also through the expansion of knowledge and culture. However, entertainment arguably played a much more vigorous role in Roman society, as lives were literally revolved around the sole aspect of enjoyment. This is also evident in our own society, as the American public flocks to the cinema and the arenas to enjoy violent movies and sports, paying a vast amount of money to experience their delights firsthand. In the Roman Empire, culture was almost solely dependent on the several forms of entertainment, which consisted of various sports along with theatre. Arguably, this sort of culture experience is even more widespread in our society, as we have almost limitless exposure to instant entertainment, through such things as cable TV to Netflix, and this is slowly leading to different types of entertainment to form, as age old devices such as theatre are beginning to evolve to fit the need of its society. Also, as seen in the Roman Empire, the aptitude for violence is astonishing, and we as a more “evolved, enlightened” people tend to think those times as barbaric. However, with some personal reflection, it can be made self-evident that we tend to migrate towards violence as well, with blockbuster movies flooded with violence and gore. This makes it evident to historians that our own history as a nation, culturally and politically, greatly mirrors the Roman Empire. Several key things, especially the parallelism with the entertainment, can be seen throughout the progression of the Romans as a society and also our own today. Also, our own government is falling down the same path as the early Roman Republic. A democratic republic government runs the United States, greatly mirroring the early stages of the Roman people and their republic. However, due to corruption of the Roman senators and a leader that was granted power and put it to his own use, they eventually fell into essentially a dictatorship. While our government is different than theirs, the similarities are almost disturbing. This sort of direct comparison allows us to greater understand this civilization, and also reflect upon ourselves. Whether this is a positive or negative likeness remains to be seen.

The Roman Empire was founded around 750 B.C., and the influence of their culture began to be seen throughout the Punic Wars. The earliest signs of entertainment emerged with the Ludi festivals, which celebrated the Roman god of Jupiter, and the influence he had on their lives. Throughout the rest of the B.C. period, the strength of the Roman Empire grew, mostly by defeating surrounding states. With this inclusion of different cultures, the entertainment spectrum began to greatly grow, with plays like Pseudolus by Plautus and Phormio by Terence leading the way for Roman comedies.
Also, several different forms of entertainment began to emerge during the early years of the republic.

One popular form of entertainment was the chariot races. Several different types of races were performed during these times, with all of them being performed in arenas like the Hippodrome. These races consisted of a several different outcomes, ranging from a simple race to the last chariot standing. The races were very intense, with some people being brutally murdered for the sake of entertainment, and were very expensive, and therefore were exclusive to the upper classes of society. This all took place in huge arenas known as circuses. Among the well-known arenas are the Hippodrome and the Circus Maximus. This colossal arena measured 621 meters in length and 118 meters in width. This lone stadium could accommodate over 60,000 citizens, which is massive even compared to today’s standards. Ludi, or Roman games that were connected to their religion, took place within this arena, along with several other games like the races. To compare to our own society, these sorts of games greatly coincide with NASCAR, or automotive racing. With the violent tendencies shown in the crashes in every race, this sort of shock and awe has lasted throughout the ages and greatly appeals to a certain demographic in the United States. While several different types of games and sports have similarities to this, NASCAR truly embodies the spirit of those races. With high spectacle and massive stadiums that hold over 200,000 people, NASCAR has the sort of allure to certain types of audiences that just can’t be explained. In NASCAR races, you cannot go an entire race without seeing a wreck involving several cars that entails massive damage. This was true in Rome as well, as many of the races were to the death, and the last faction standing won the game. While this may seem as brutal and uncouth to our modern society, we ourselves are not so different, as there are deaths each year in horse and NASCAR races, and several wrecks per race, and we do not find this to be unsuitable for an audience, with millions of families flocking to the great stadiums. While the actual violence itself has been toned down, many things in these forms of entertainment today are still just as brutal and uncouth as they were over 2,000 years ago. As a race, human beings love to watch chaos unfold before our eyes at high speeds, and with the chariot races and their modern adaptations, we are able to see large amounts of it.

One of the most influential forms of entertainment, not only during the Roman times, but throughout history in general are the gladiator fights. Gladiator fights have always been included as a vital part of Roman culture, and with good reason. The gladiator fight signified several different social aspects into Roman life, such as slavery and the will imposed on the lower classes by the nobility. Gladiators took place in places called amphitheaters, which mean they could be flooded with water or sand to create different types of warfare. The amount of work and ingenuity that went into these arenas is truly fascinating, and draws wonder to the architecture and tactics employed by the Romans. The most famous of these amphitheaters was the Coliseum, the ruins of which are still standing today in Rome. Construction of the Coliseum began in 70 A.D., and was finally completed around 80 A.D. One such documented flooding of an
amphitheater occurred after the Punic Wars, with the Roman Emperor Claudius staging a great naval battle that was a reenactment of Fucine Lake. This took over thirty years to prepare, and consisted of 100 ships and 19,000 sailors and soldiers that formed the two sides in the battle, the Romans and the opposing Rhodians. (Hammer 4) The gladiator fights evolved several times throughout the course of its history. At first, gladiators were professional fighters that were trained in a sort of gladiator school. However, due to the threat of private armies, these schools were soon disbanded by the state. After this, the demand for the gladiators grew, and the supply rose to meet it with many different types of people taken in. Slaves of the Roman state, conquered inferior people, prisoners of war, early Christians and those who volunteered now began to make up the gladiator masses.

One very interesting facet of the gladiators is the often-overlooked gender diversity within the gladiator ranks. While there were not many, women gladiators were very much a part of the entertainment spectrum. Although it is not known exactly when female gladiators emerged, it is believed that they were included in the early years of A.D. In 1996, an archaeological team found evidence of what they believed to be a female gladiator, with supporting evidence including Anubis with her remains, who was often associated with fallen gladiators (McCullough 200). This somewhat recent development has greatly influenced our own knowledge of the gender equality during this time, and offers interesting trains of thought for future research. There were several different types of battles throughout the history of gladiators.

The versatility of the amphitheaters truly began to accentuate the games, as the reenactments grew to battles on land, and also included man vs. beast as well. These events were widely attended, with mainly the aristocrats being the targeted audiences. Some lower class members were present also, but they were typically in poor seating arrangements and were distant from the action. The allure of these fights was the violence and the escape from reality that was allowed during these battles. Audience members could also witness great battle reenactments, which allowed them to experience their culture and history firsthand. While some gladiators had moderate success and became popular throughout the city of Rome, they were eventually killed in the line of duty. Most gladiators didn’t live past their first few games, with the most successful living through ten games and never past the age of 30 (Hammer 6).

While we view this as completely barbaric and manic, their society viewed this as a suitable form of entertainment and deemed this as enjoyable. The gladiator fights were extremely popular throughout the Roman republic and empire, with hundreds of thousands in attendance at events. This was truly remarkable that something so brutal and inhumane could attract so many people and hold their interest for such a long period of history. Several amphitheaters were built all around the Roman territory, and for some of the smaller civilizations this was the only form of entertainment they could provide for their citizens. Most of these arenas were very large in scale, but some of the smaller cities had smaller amphitheaters, and usually placed them outside the town due to their size. In today’s society, there are several different sports and forms of entertainment...
that are easily relatable to the gladiator fights in Rome. With modern entertainment such as movies, there is a growing call for gore and violence, and our society is slowly adapting to the increase of such things. While we criticize the Romans for watching brutal murders, we tend to watch movies and TV shows that highly dramatizes murder and violence, and even celebrated movies over the gladiator fights. Almost every movie that is not intended for children has violence in it now, and we are deeming this acceptable, just as the Romans did with their entertainment for the masses. Also, as Americans, and particularly Texans, we love our football. We build huge arenas to watch our favorite teams, and we flock to stadiums every Saturday and Sunday to watch them play, much like the Romans. Also, the sport of football is also similar to the fights that took place during these times. Football is a very violent sport, with men who build up their bodies to the peak of human physicality for the sole purpose of taking other men to the ground over a ball. It is truly amazing to think that in 2,000 years civilizations could be studying our sports and entertainment and conclude that football was completely barbaric and inhumane.

Also, the spectacle-filled sport of wrestling greatly parallels the grisly fights in the Roman Empire. With great emphasis on the personality of the individual wrestler, we see some of the same support for individuals as was common for gladiators. Also, wrestling is packed with spectacle and different styles of fights, such as cage matches and ladder fights. The emergence of mixed martial arts fighting also allows for reflection, as pitting two combatants against each other, and having the victor declared after a brutal fight is almost hand-in-hand with gladiator combat. With a vast amount of options, this greatly compares to the amphitheater fights. The gladiator fights are probably the most well known form of entertainment for the Romans, and it is also the most relatable to our culture with its violent tendencies, as well being widely attended. It is astounding to think of the amount of people who died in the arena, and also those who apart of the audience. This kind of escape from everyday life, which is essentially what entertainment consists of, is what the masses of the Rome society longed for.

The most common denominator for all of these forms of entertainment lay in the ever-changing performance art: theatre. Although Greece, often drawn together with Roman history, was more supportive of the arts, the Roman state became known for its practicalness, such as law, engineering and military conquest. This sort of focus was also seen in the presence of its theatre. Unlike the Greeks, the Romans tended to write and perform simple comedies, with the primary reason of entertaining the civilians. This early form of comedy first began to emerge through the Atellan farces (Goldfarb 62). Most likely, a group of Greek mimes migrated south of Rome and began to influence the surrounding people, and this started to establish some performance art. However, the greatest influence on Roman theatre was the Greek theater. Essentially, Greek creativity and art were the building blocks of the entire entertainment spectrum for the Romans. They borrowed innovations and thought processes freely from the Greeks, and typically did not revolutionize the theatre. However, major Roman festivals began to incorporate theatre as a way to worship their gods. The first festivals to do so were
the *Ludi* festivals; they were dedicated to Jupiter, and allowed for staged activities starting around 240 B.C. However, only three true Roman playwrights’ works have survived the test of time: Plautus, Terence, and Seneca. Plautus (254-84 B.C.) emerged as one of the great comic Roman writers (Goldfarb 64). Heavily influenced by the Greeks, plays like *Pseudolus* and *Miles Gloriosus* paved the way for Roman comedy. Terence (185-159) followed Plautus in a similar writing style. Combining two Greek plays for his own, Terence had a considerable impact on the Roman comedic spectrum as well. However, Seneca (4 B.C.-A.D. 65) is largely considered Rome’s greatest tragic writer. Tutor to the Roman emperor Nero, Seneca took Greek myths, and transposed them into Roman culture and language. However, Seneca’s version of these plays entailed some slight alterations, as in his version of *Oedipus*, the titular character actually blinds himself. The presence of tragedy is obvious, but the Roman people tended to prefer comedies and simple festivities to them. This is where the similarities began to stretch for the Romans and modern day Americans. In the United States, theatre is very much an active art, with new works and train "sof thought encouraged. The genres of theatre performed are extremely diverse, and also incorporate several different styles of art into the works. However, the average American would prefer to watch an easygoing comedy over a tragedy. Over the past few decades, comedies have pulled in 54.9 billion dollars, as compared to the 38.94 billion for drama (Statista). This preference greatly compares to the Roman culture finding solace in comedic writing, and also shows that we prefer laughing to crying. While this is somewhat disheartening due to the great works of art that possibly being underappreciated, humanity has time and time again proven to express their need to laugh.

The similarities between the Roman state and the United States is particularly eerie, considering how the Romans fell. Throughout their entertainment spectrum, the Romans idolized violence, historical interpretations, and carefree entertainment. This is also seen throughout ourselves, as every year millions of Americans tune in to watch their favorite team or athlete, and flock to movies with a heavy depiction of violence and comedic situations. While this is somewhat disheartening to know that we greatly resemble a state that was thriving 2,000 years ago, this comparison allows us to gain a greater knowledge of not only ourselves, but also the human race as a whole.

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**Works Cited**

