Articles

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Abstract

Ben Hur Live was a live, arena-based version of the story from Lew Wallace's novel *Ben-Hur* (1880), best known via the 1959 film version directed by William Wyler, that premiered at London's O2 Arena in 2009. Meant as the start of a world tour, the show was a financial flop and its run was cut short. I argue that this show was in fact an early example of a small genre of oversized productions – Arena Spectaculars – that brings together live versions of screen material in a specifically post-cinematic way. Since *Ben Hur Live*'s financial failure, there have been financially successful shows such as *Batman Live* and *Walking with Dinosaurs: The Arena Spectacular*; their very titles showing their contingent and intertextual nature. Although seemingly niche, aberrant or even ridiculous, the arena spectacular can actually illuminate many things about contemporary consumption of texts in a post-cinematic, networked and franchised economy of images.

Keywords: cinema, early cinema, post-cinema, adaptation, remediation, liveness, authenticity, spectacle

1. What was *Ben Hur Live*?

Figure 1: Inside London's O2 Arena during the interval of *Ben Hur Live*, 2009. Author's photograph.

Ben Hur Live opened in London at the start of a planned (but ultimately truncated) world tour in 2009, at the O2 Arena, produced by Franz Abraham; I saw it myself in the opening week. It was a production combining elements of theatre, circus and film, with modes of spectatorship from live music, sport and even religious spectacle. However, it is not without precedent and fits into a specific category of live shows, often called 'Arena

Spectaculars'. This particular 'spectacular' was not an immediate financial or critical success (Espinoza 2010) – perhaps its hypertext was too distant in time or the execution too unwieldy – but over the next few years more 'arena spectaculars' came to The O2 and other similar arenas around the United Kingdom and internationally. These were also often adapted from screen-based originals, such as *Walking with Dinosaurs: The Arena Spectacular*, first arriving in Europe in 2009 (based on the BBC television programme *Walking with Dinosaurs* [1999]) and *Batman Live* (2011). These two later shows in particular seemed to further capitalize on the specific kinds of brand tie-ins and quick-fire spectacle that live, arena presentation allows, and despite *Ben Hur Live*'s status as a 'flop', here it will be considered as an early example of what became a popular form.

Why does anyone (myself included) want to see one of these shows; what are the attractions of these events to twenty-first-century audiences? They seem to paradoxically include imperatives of both rarefied high-culture – which uses the exclusivity of one-off performances, unique artefacts and high ticket prices – and commercial, 'industrial' entertainment – which requires huge dissemination, recognizable stars and brands and enormous but geographically dispersed audiences. They also seem to be built upon a desire for physical proximity to fictional characters, as if the barrier of the cinema, television or computer screen was being made permeable. The promotion for the shows invokes singularity and uniqueness; terms such as 'real' and 'authentic' are often used. Indeed, marketing for arena spectaculars often claims a kind of spectatorial absorption or immersion in a 'world' as a marker of authenticity. These shows offer exclusivity through scarcity in a media landscape that could be characterized by the easy availability of media over the internet and via television: in 2011, a promotional flyer read 'THE ONLY WAY

TO EXPERIENCE BATMAN LIVE ON STAGE'. As well as tracking *Ben Hur Live*'s lineage as an adaptation, I will argue that the way the arena spectacular foregrounds both physical labour and the spectacle of financial expenditure is specifically post-cinematic, in that the shows propose 'liveness' as a new, added ingredient to familiar screen images. Although the results might look somewhat similar, this is what makes arena spectaculars distinctly different to their historical analogues in older arenas, spectacles and in theatre – in the arena, we are spectators to the 'labour' of the production. The various versions of Disney characters, encountered in theme parks, on stage and on ice, also seem to offer an obvious precedent to the arena spectacular; however, the occlusion of labour (behind the masks of the cartoon characters) and the lack of 'pro-filmic event' in the making of the original animations set them aside from the arena spectacular as defined here. Rather than the 'pro-filmic' event that has to take place in order to create analogue cinema (Baudry 1986; Mulvey 1975), the arena spectacular seems to offer a 'post-filmic event', in that we are shown cinematic or televisual images being made (made again; remade) 'live', in front of us – with the visible expenditure of resources as part of the spectacle. I will argue that these types of engagement are responses to economic and social changes specific to the highly flexible media landscape of the current, post-cinematic period.

Anyone seeking video footage of this show online will immediately find lots of promotional coverage, but relatively little audience-captured footage. Since the show itself was not well received, but stands as an outrider for the form of the arena spectacular, my subject is as much the marketing and the 'proposed' pleasures of the show as it is the actual experience of it, and my choice of sources reflects that. Presented as tantalizingly and explicitly hybrid, *Ben Hur Live* provides us with a strange

combination of different types of spectacle and conflations of spaces, time periods and

narrative modes. It was nothing if not ambitious, promising:

> [S]pectacular entertainment for the whole family – it brings the Formula 1 of ancient
>
> times to the Circus Maximus of today – staging multiple brilliant scenes such as a naval
>
> battle with huge galleys on a sea of fog and fantastic light effects, all imbedded in one of
>
> the greatest and dramatic story lines that has ever have been written and produced as a
>
> movie […] BEN HUR LIVE will be staged in a 360°- arena in order to give the audience
>
> – like in an antique arena – the experience of an exceptional closeness to the event. Thus,
>
> the action on the 2000 sqm rink […] can be captured with all the senses, supported by
>
> special effects, fire, water, wind and the dispersed dust from the chariot race – the
>
> highlight of the antique spectacle.

> (Anon. 2009a n.pag)

Implausibly, the key scenes would have to include a sea battle between pirates and

Roman galleys, a high-speed (and for many participants fatal) chariot race, visits to both

a leper colony and imperial Rome and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ; these all being vital

elements to the original narrative. An image that encapsulates the contrasts within *Ben

Hur Live* was repeated in a promotional billboard poster, the show's website, a video

trailer and the show itself: an ancient Roman-style chariot, driven at speed across the

floor of a modern indoor arena. An online video trailer tantalizingly showed close-ups of

charioteers preparing for a race, shot in cinematic high contrast and embellished with

dramatic sound effects, who then career out into a roaring arena; the crowd incongruously

bristling with camera flashes. The proposition here seems twofold: first, the anachronism

of the Roman chariot in that particular setting; second, the chance of witnessing a real,

spectacular performance, live. *Ben Hur Live*, then, would comprise of 'Ben-Hur': the film

(although the show drops the hyphen from its hero's name), and 'Live': the arena.

Created by Franz Abraham and produced by his company Art Concerts, it consisted of acted scenes from the story scripted in Latin and Aramaic, narrated in English by the show's composer Stuart Copeland (of rock band The Police), as well as choreographed dances, horse riding, gladiatorial combat, as well as the final chariot race. The production was designed in part by Mark Fisher, famous for his work with Pink Floyd and The Rolling Stones and as the designer of the 'Millennium Show', part of *The Millennium Experience* (2000). Despite the anachronisms, which had seemed enough of a part of the marketing to suggest a certain irony in the show, the whole thing was seemingly intended as having great seriousness – much like the Wyler film version. The audience seemed not to know what to do when the crucifixion appeared – some around me cheered, others maintained an awkward or perhaps respectful silence. The chariot race was slow looking compared to the tightly edited film sequence most spectators probably knew – one could find oneself looking away from the action to other parts of the set and even the lighting rig during *Ben Hur Live*'s climactic scene.

In the promotion of the show, its proposed qualities might equally suggest a Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*, a Victorian panorama or an Edwardian pageant:

> History becomes alive and makes us forget time. And now, like 2000 years ago, the audience can experience the Roman Empire and Galilee around the time of the birth of Christ, plunge into the arenas of antiquity, to an era that was shaped by dramatic conflicts, tragedy and hope, bread and games. Breakneck chariot races and scenes of an antique naval battle alternated with appearances by gladiators, the performance of orgiastic festivals and vivid Arabian market life. 100 performers, 100 animals, horses and free flying birds of prey, huge backdrops and galleys with expanded sails create the perfect illusion – an antique panorama with the fate of Judah Ben Hur right in front of it.
>
> (Anon. 2009a n.pag)

This arena spectacular show might seem like a kind of living fossil – a resurrection of Victorian theatre and Edwardian pageantry, or even earlier (*Ben Hur Live* seemed to openly capitalize and depend upon an ancient lineage in the Roman circus). There are historical precedents for spectacular stagings of ancient vistas; Deborah Sugg Ryan has written on the shows produced at London's Olympia by Hungarian entrepreneurs Imre and Bolossy Kiralfy (Sugg Ryan 2010). In 1889 they put on a show called *Nero, or the Fall of Rome* that had 'huge sets and hundreds of actors, animals, and extras' arranged into a 'tableau-vivant' (Sugg Ryan 2010: 47). Indeed, Marc Klaw and Abraham Lincoln Erlanger's 1899 stage version of *Ben-Hur* might seem to be the original 'Ben Hur Live'. However, according to its promoters, the show's relevant lineage is in the novel and film versions of the story:

> The movie of the same title starring Charlton Heston – awarded with 11 Oscars and still the most decorated Hollywood production of all times [*sic*] – has become a legend long ago. The original book by Lewis Wallace was a worldwide bestseller in the 1900's. But it was not until the film adaptation of 1959 that the incomparable pictures came into being.
>
> (Anon. 2009a n.pag)

Although not explicitly an adaptation of any of the film versions of the book (which would require the backing of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film studio), the significant filmic history of Ben-Hur and the large genre of ancient-world epics that the show drew upon (e.g. Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, 2000) requires us to view *Ben Hur Live* in a cinematic context – as we are asked to by the show's promoters with their repeated references to Wyler's 1959 film. The show promises to place images from films and television into physical and social space. On the one hand, the producers seem to propose 'liveness' (to use Philip Auslander's term [1999]) and physical presence as more direct

and therefore more real than a recorded, mediated experience. However, on the other, they are offering a heightened visibility and awareness of the technology producing the live scene, in the lists of technological and performance elements used in publication and in the arena itself through the wealth of devices that vie for one's attention. Not only that but the adapted nature of the narrative material, the filmic and televisual origins of which form the initial 'hook' for the shows, means that the audience must have the screen-based images in mind as well. Part of what the audience was invited to witness was the reconstruction of those images, without the framing-out or editing of clumsy, slow or unconvincing moments, as 'post-filmic events'.

2. Ben-Hur and cinema

The Ben-Hur story has a significant place in film history, including iterations of the story that pre-date the 90 minute-plus narrative-feature format that we know today; Ben-Hur was present when the cinema was new and in major flux. During these earlier periods, cinema was a compound, made up of many existent forms as well as new technologies of image capture and presentation, just as the post-cinematic arena spectacular is today. In both contexts – proto-cinematic and post-cinematic – we see attempts to offer audiences various kinds of absorption in the world of the screen image.

Two short chapters in Wallace's 1880 novel *Ben-Hur* describe the climactic chariot race. We are given detailed coordinates with which to imagine ourselves inside the ancient circus:

> Directly behind the balustrade on the coping of the balcony is the first seat, from which ascend the succeeding benches, each higher than the one in front of it, giving to view a spectacle of surpassing interest – the spectacle of a vast space ruddy and glistening with human faces, and rich with vari-coloured costumes.

And on into the next chapter:

> Let the reader first look down upon the arena, and see it glistening in its frame of dull-grey granite walls, let him then, in this perfect field, see the chariots, light of wheel, very graceful, and ornate as paint and burnishing can make them.

Like the later arena spectacular, the book emphasizes the exposed bodies of the racers: '[L]et [the reader] see the drivers, erect and statuesque, undisturbed by the motion of the cars, their limbs naked, and fresh and ruddy with the healthful polish of the baths' (Wallace 1996: 235). Also like the arena spectacular, Wallace offers a view of the entire space of the arena, writing from the visual perspective of a person in the crowd. In Marc Klaw and Abraham Lincoln Erlanger's 1899 stage version, the chariot race was staged with horse-drawn chariots on moveable treadmills, framed (arguably 'cinematically') by the proscenium arches of theatres of the time; with what star actor William S. Hart refers to as 'that gargantuan mass of wheels, boards and steel cables', allowing stagehands to determine the relative positions of the race teams (Hart 1994: 153). Hart describes the scene: 'The whirring of the treadmills, the machinelike cracking of our whips, the pounding of the horses' rubber-shod hoofs […] [t]he noise was deafening – the applause was thunderous' (Hart 1994: 153). However, even at this early point in cinema history, comparison to film was inevitable: '[T]he management could hire Madison Square arena for a veritable chariot race and vitascope or vitagraph it […] [t]he pictures on a screen […] would be closer to realism and more faithful in illustration', wrote Hillary Bell in 1899 (quoted in Vardac 1949: 78). Sidney Olcott did something very similar to what Bell suggests when in 1907 he enlisted a group of New Jersey firemen to stage a chariot race

on a local beach and made a fifteen-minute, silent film version of *Ben-Hur* (Benson 1993). Fred Niblo directed the 1925 epic silent version of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio. This time the film ran over two hours and, as well as the chariot race, included a sea-battle scene from the novel. The final cut of the film includes shots in which cast members can be seen jumping into the sea as fires started on the ships for visual effect get out of control, and a real chariot crash in which several stuntmen and horses are visibly injured (Benson 1993). Despite the apparent loss of life, the film reputedly saved MGM, the studio that made it.

As a relatively new medium, film in the early part of the twentieth century had to make itself understood by reference to older ones, much like the arena spectacular genre does today. Deborah Sugg Ryan has written that

> [S]pectacle, deriving from both high and popular culture, was a major part of leisure activities in Edwardian Britain. […] There were distinctively spectacular forms of theater […] [i]n addition to these, Edwardians could view lantern-slide lectures, waxworks, fairs, circuses, magic shows, balloon ascents, sideshows, and street entertainers […] [w]omen had the department stores, and men had the spectacle of professional sport.
>
> (2010: 45)

It was into this context of a range of already established spectacles that cinema was born. In his famous article 'The cinema of attractions: Early film, its spectator, and the avant-garde', Tom Gunning's assessment of the context for viewing and understanding films in this early period leads him towards 'a conception that sees cinema less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power […] and exoticism' (Gunning 1990: 230). Gunning argues that the 'attractions' model has been a constant presence in cinema:

> The 1924 version of *Ben Hur* was in fact shown at a Boston theater with a timetable announcing the moment of its prime attractions […] The Hollywood advertising policy of enumerating the features of a film, each emblazoned with the command "See!", shows this primal power of the attraction running beneath the armature of narrative regulation.
>
> (Gunning 1990: 234)

Gunning's work establishes the primacy of narrative in film as a later development, rather than a fundamental quality; 1924 is the latest date Gunning cites in his description of original attractions cinema. If we regard early cinema in this manner, it appears as something much more like the hybrid format of the new arena spectacular, rather than the solidified medium we know as 'the feature film' today.

According to media theorists Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, 'remediation' is a process by which new technologies are understood via more familiar ones (2000). D. W. Griffith is often thought of as the inventor of the American feature film but scholarship around his work reveals examples of remediation in early cinema and also shows ways in which the extravagant proportions of the productions (i.e. the orchestration of a 'pro-filmic event') often became spectacles in their own right. In *Film Follies*, Stuart Klawans proposes that in this period of flexibility and development of the medium, D. W. Griffith's epic historical film *Intolerance* (1916) drew upon Griffith's experience of contemporary world's fairs in the United States: '*Intolerance* must have been inspired by the San Francisco fair, if only because it resembled nothing else' (Klawans 1999: 12). In attempting to work in the then new feature film format, both writers argue that Griffith 'must have' referred to media that were already both aesthetically and commercially established: '[H]e wanted something new; and like anyone in that situation, he could imagine the unknowable only in relation to the things at hand' (Klawans 1999: 9). The

remediation of exhibition into filmmaking also worked in reverse, with early pro-filmic events being incorporated into an existing economy of exhibitions:

> [Producer Carl] Laemmle had celebrated the opening of his vast new studio complex in Los Angeles, Universal City, only to find himself swamped by 20,000 curiosity seekers. Showman that he was, he ordered the construction of bleachers for future visitors and proceeded to promote Universal City as a tourist attraction, comparable […] to the Panama-Pacific Exposition.
>
> (Klawans 1999: 9)

This was at the very beginnings of the Hollywood system, but the same tactic was employed on the 1959 *Ben-Hur* film, the sets of which 'became a regular daily tour for the sightseeing buses of Rome' (Freiman 1959 under 'Random Revelations'). The author also states that it was Laemmle that recognized William Wyler's potential when he worked for Universal in the 1920's (under 'The Wyler Touch'). Today in the arena spectacular, we can see some of the same symptoms: a film opening out of the screen into something like a world's fair or exhibition.

The adapted lineage of Ben Hur is complex and long, but it is the fact that despite many formal elements being repeated it is not present or legible to audiences of the arena version that really illuminates the post-cinematic nature of the show's 'liveness'. Within *Ben Hur Live*'s marketing, the 'live' is proposed as the new, exciting addition, even though 'live' versions of the story and others similar to it pre-date the cinematic ones.

3. Post-cinematic spectacle and authenticity

In terming a situation 'post-', we imply that significant reference is still being made to that prior state of affairs. Film theorist D. N. Rodowick writes:

> [O]ur audiovisual culture remains 'cinematic' in the sense that the most popular forms of
>
> digital media long to recreate and intensify cinematic effects of framing, editing, dynamic
>
> point of view, and mobile framing […] The idea of cinema persists as a way of modelling
>
> time-based spatial forms with computers.

(2007: 133)

Although their reference to cinema is often clear, it could not be said that arena

spectaculars straightforwardly 'intensify cinematic effects of framing, editing'. However,

in defining the post-cinematic Steven Shaviro goes a step further, writing that:

> [W]e are now witnessing the emergence of a different media regime, and indeed of a
>
> different mode of production, than those which dominated the twentieth century. Digital
>
> technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically
>
> new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience.

(2010: 2)

Shaviro states that film was the defining medium of the twentieth century, 'cinema' in his

usage becomes a shorthand for '20th century media', but he states that we are, in the

twenty-first century, leaving that 'regime' behind, hence 'post-cinema'. Consequently, in

Post Cinematic Affect, Shaviro writes of 'media works' rather than 'films' or 'movies' –

a term that encompasses works that are reproducible and often made up of moving

images, using cinematic tropes, but are often produced and/or distributed digitally

(Shaviro 2010). The sited cinema presentation of today is itself also adapting in response

to the post-cinematic context.

Although Wyler's *Ben-Hur* is an example of Hollywood studio production par

excellence – in its use of star actors, lavish production, technical innovation and heavy

marketing – it could be argued that in fact it appears at the very early stages of 'post-

cinema'. The 30 years in between Niblo's and Wyler's films had seen the golden age of

Hollywood arrive, peak and begin to wane. At the time, the studio MGM who owned the rights to the story, after having already produced Niblo's version, were in financial trouble and needed a hit film to keep them open (Benson 1993). In the 1950s, cinema was losing out to television, and it was felt that only large, spectacular productions could draw in crowds in sufficient numbers, hence everything about the film being oversized; its budget, its sets and its claims to epic narrative status (see Freiman 1959). Wyler's film itself is already a response to a rapidly changing media landscape. It is as much the economic context within which any product is encountered that makes it 'post-cinematic' as the materiality of the artefact itself.

For Shaviro, the post-cinematic is intrinsically dependent upon neo-liberal economics, the instantaneous and frantic nature of globalized finance impacting aesthetically upon increasingly fractured narratives that can appear anywhere, anytime in a networked world full of networked screens. At our current point in history, screens and recordings constitute a large part of our life world and are highly likely to be our first site of encounter with characters such as Ben-Hur or Batman. In this sense, the predominantly live and 'analogue' arena spectacular show can be situated as a post-cinematic phenomenon. Philip Auslander's book *Liveness* (Auslander 1999) addresses the plight of live performance in a society and a culture dominated by 'mediatized' images. Auslander argues that very idea of 'live' appears with the invention of recording and that 'live' mediums such as theatre are inherently and unavoidably 'altered' by the possibility of recording. Auslander writes that 'the word "live" is not used to define intrinsic, ontological properties of performance that set it apart from mediatized forms, but rather is a historically contingent term' (1999: 60). Here is where the potential wider significance

of the arena spectacular emerges: 'liveness', within a mediatized culture is aberrant, exotic; the 'new' offer of liveness (and, as an intrinsic part of that, communality) appears in connection to familiar screen images.

In *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin plot each medium on an arc of 'authenticity', with each new one claiming to be more 'real' than the one previous, thereby establishing a 'unique selling point', even within an existing franchise or set of adaptations. They find this easily demonstrable in industries such as computer gaming, where the authors perceive a claim to authenticity through interactivity; a gamer-controlled viewpoint rather than a predetermined camera shot is proposed as more real; more akin to direct sensory experience (2000: 68). They actually make quite casual use of the term 'authentic', which to them seems to be akin to 'affective'; an emotional, or even bodily engagement with a text; for example, theme parks allow a more 'authentic experience' for the audience compared to films (2000: 170). Their examples make it clear that new technological additions to the way a story is told can be 'remediated' via ideas of authenticity and in this way can diversify commercially owned franchises and brands. The hyperbolic advertising that always accompanies arena spectaculars aligns with this sensibility, usually selling a show as the 'most authentic' version of a narrative world. In *Ben Hur Live*'s case, this is expressed in terms of a 'journey through time' (Anon. 2009a) – the audience will not just passively watch a show but be transported to an ancient world. Therefore, *Ben Hur Live* is a more authentic, remediated version of Wyler's 1959 *Ben Hur* film.

An unusual part of this particular show's claim to authenticity is Ben-Hur's relationship to religious devotion. Lew Wallace gave his book the subtitle *A Tale of the*

Christ, as the life of his character Ben-Hur intersects with that of Christ at several points in the narrative. This devotional aspect of the book was no doubt a contributing factor in its huge success, going some way to temper an exotic fiction for religious American readers. On the original release of the show Abraham, a reborn Catholic, made much of his own sacrifices for it and described it as 'an opera for God' (Hoyle 2009 n.pag). His own role is hybrid, encompassing both a kind of old-testament-style offering to God and a Romantic self-sacrifice for 'Art'. However, generally the show's proposed authenticity is not connected to historical or religious truth, but rather to spectators witnessing 'real', 'live' action performed in front of them. This notion of authenticity offered against those 'incomparable pictures' of the feature film version has two major facets: that of 'authentic experiences' of 'liveness' beyond the cinematic screen and that of spectacular expenditure.

In his book on designer and architect Mark Fisher, who designed elements of this show as well as the 'Millennium Show', Eric Holding identifies this kind of spectacle as inherent to the type of performance on which Fisher worked, which 'draws upon the excesses of its production for the marketing of its product' (2000: 123). This is clearly demonstrated in the 'boosterism' employed in advance publicity materials that exploits remarkable statistical or numerical facts as a way of engaging with its potential audience. Numerical data, showing materials used or money spent, for example, are provided as if representing conclusive evidence that this is, indeed, a 'spectacle that demands to be seen' (Holding 2000: 123). Holding here acknowledges that, in spectacular shows, we are watching real and demonstrable expenditure, presented as a worthy spectacle in itself. Returning to Ben-Hur's long-standing relationship to massive expenditure: advertising

for the 1959 film attests to its position as the 'most expensive film ever made', it had the 'largest single motion-picture set ever built' for its chariot race scene (Freiman 1959 n.pag, under heading 'The Making of the Film'), even its use of the 'biggest sign ever advertising a movie' becomes part of the promotion (Hoyle 2009 n.pag). In Ray Freiman's promotional book for the 1959 film, he even cites the amount of human hair that was used to make the wigs for the film: '[M]ore than four hundred pounds were assembled at Cinecittà Studios […] [m]ost of the hair came from peasant women […] famous for their fine hair' (Freiman 1959 n.pag, under 'Random Revelations'). In a video interview with the Guardian newspaper, Producer Franz Abraham remained loyal to this boosterist tradition in stating that '[i]f this is not working out, then I am ruined, completely, forever' (Hoyle 2009 n.pag). Here, he presents the show, which was without any other major investor aside from his own company Art Concerts, as a huge personal risk. Through disclosures such as these, made before the show opened in London, Abraham presented himself as a daring visionary. The double-logic of this approach seems to be that a personal project such as his, in which he has invested so much, will be closer to 'real art', and that Abraham is taking a personal risk, as if to match the physical risk undertaken by his charioteers. Within a boosterist marketing campaign, financial expenditure is authentic and dramatic – a spectacle in its own right. Personal financial risk can only add to this, making the production itself a dramatic story with its own cast of characters. These considerations within the production of the show add to complex currencies of authenticity at play within *Ben Hur Live*.

An obvious cinematic point of comparison for *Ben Hur Live* is Ridley Scott's 2000 film *Gladiator*. This hugely popular film might be responsible for the slew of

ancient-world epic cinema that, in part, provided commercial impetus for a show like *Ben Hur Live*. However, a well-publicized element of *Gladiator*'s production was the enormous amount of computer-generated components required to create naturalistic images of ancient Rome and its huge arena (in fact even actor Oliver Reed's appearance in the film was partly computer generated, the actor having died during the film's production [Cousins 2011]). Part of Abraham's choice of the Ben-Hur story is to do with making a link to a pre-digital spectacle, in reaction to the 'illusions' of computer-generated images (CGIs):

> The impossible is made possible by the latest engineering. For two hours the oldest dream of mankind to go on a journey back in time seems to come true, not only through filmic implementation or virtual animation, but within grasp and sensually noticeable.
>
> (Anon. 2009a n.pag)

The phrase 'sensually noticeable' is an unusual term, perhaps meant to be sexually suggestive. This quote is very telling – note that although technology is highlighted in both instances, filmic and arena, the show has 'engineering', whereas film has 'implementation' and is 'virtual'. The word 'engineering' is meant to connote the physical world: gravity, materials and manual work, perhaps even a more 'honest' kind of production (rivets; steel; carved wood, rather than the binary code that makes up CGI images). In this way, the show harks back to an age without CGIs, which is simultaneously the ancient Roman Empire, Wallace's nineteenth-century God-fearing America and 1950's Hollywood.

The show's authenticity is different to the auratic authenticity of an ancient artefact; it is a quality typified by the show's attempted supersession of the 1959 film and even the technology of cinema-based presentation itself. Rather than the cinema's

capability to 'show' an audience things and places (real or imagined), the arena spectacular takes us on 'a journey back in time'. It proposes to put the audience in proximity to these things through physical presence and therefore direct sensory perception of the show, rather than technologically mediated and recorded images. This is the meaning of the term 'live' in the show's title and is also what Bolter and Grusin mean by 'authentic' – getting closer to 'the thing'. The mediation of the cinema is proposed as having been superseded by an 'engineered' pure experience of something 'real'. Here, aura is 'added on', rather than revealed.

The basis of the arena spectacular's 'live' is the idea of cinematic presentation as 'non-live', the audience 'not present'; the on-screen performances as 'dead'. This can only exist for cinematic/post-cinematic spectators; Christian Metz wrote that a fundamental condition of film is that 'I watch it, but it doesn't watch me watching it'; we are separated completely from the world of the film (1982: 94). The world of a film is a remote world, it is screened off. Tom Gunning positions his cinema of attractions within the 'Lumiére tradition of "placing the world within one's reach"' (1990: 230) – meaning within one's *sight*. By the time the arena spectacular show appears, 'the world' is already very much in one's sight – the trajectory of twentieth- and twenty-first-century media having been one of ever increasing availability of images. To an audience member in the O2, a Google image search, carried out on a smart-phone, brings virtually any image to their screen in moments. We have, in this sense of availability, achieved the intimacy with reproducible images that Walter Benjamin discerned in the 1930s (Benjamin 1999). The arena spectacular places its images almost literally within one's physical, tactile 'reach', to be directly 'sensually noticeable' and reborn as post-cinematically auratic

events. Much of this is achieved via the presence of the actual, living bodies of the performers. In *Ben Hur Live*, the performers appear as bodies in peril and bodies presented as sexualized objects. The actual (present, not filmed) flesh of the performers is exoticized and eroticized in *Ben Hur Live*, as in all iterations of the story; even in Wallace's novel, he invites the reader to gaze upon the character's bodies: '[T]heir limbs naked, and fresh and ruddy with the healthful polish of the baths' (1996: 235). When speaking of his work on the Millennium Dome show, *Ben Hur Live*'s designer Mark Fisher referred to 'rather sexy and energetic young people doing dangerous and beautiful things only yards away' (Anon. 1999: 180) and we see the same logic here. Part of this voyeurism are fantasies built upon the possibility of really witnessing these bodies damaged in the several battle scenes or in the chariot race. This is suggested by the references to the ancient arena, famous for the various deaths met there, but is an echo of the danger within the film versions' productions. As I described above, the 1925 version includes footage of real, unintended chariot crashes, and rumours still circulate that the 1959 version contains the same (Benson 1993). 'Live' is at least in part synonymous with 'alive' – real, living bodies 'within grasp and sensually noticeable' that could (but probably will not) die, in front of us on the sand of the arena floor.

4. The future of the arena spectacular

Are these arena spectacular productions merely an oddity, an aesthetic cul-de-sac simply filling a commercial niche, or are they indicative of a more widespread and increasing desire in audiences for direct experience of live productions? The O2 Arena has since been host to horse shows, BMX bike shows, 'arena cross' motorcycling and live versions of television programmes such as *Strictly Come Dancing* (Anon. 2022). In 2012, the

London Olympics opening ceremony was directed by film director Danny Boyle and titled 'Isles of Wonder'. The event was a hybrid of loosely narrative theatrical, dance and musical performances, as well as the formalities of welcoming the national teams taking part in the games. This amalgam of elements found in previous spectaculars, such as *Ben Hur Live*, blended with nationalistic pageantry was a huge success. This assessment from Marina Hyde in the Guardian newspaper was typical: '[D]eliriously enjoyable, occasionally bemusing, supremely humanistic creation, in which no button remained unpushed, virtually no cultural memory unjogged' (Hyde 2012 n.pag). The Olympic opening ceremony is hard to define outside of pure description and its singular context. However, it is not a radical work. It was understood and enjoyed through a delicately cantilevered set of relations to existing forms, genres and narratives. Boyle understood his task via film, saying '[w]e're trying to make you feel like you're watching a live film being made' (Gibson 2012 n.pag). The event was approached by Boyle and his team as a 'show' in itself rather than simply decorating the ceremonial function of starting the games; it was another 'arena spectacular', again adapting various material (including the character of James Bond and of course the director's own expertise) from the screen, into the arena. More recently, the UK government's industrial strategy website includes the following comment on the 'audience of the future': 'You will soon be able to become totally immersed in your favourite film, sport or other cultural activity, thanks to a UK government investment to support the best UK storytellers to create ground-breaking immersive experiences' (Anon. 2020 n.pag). In post-Olympic Britain, post-cinematic live spectacle appears to be popular, bankable and explicitly supported within the government's industrial strategy.

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