

Bogdan BURLIGA\*

**TERTULLIAN ON THE PARADOX  
OF THE ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE GAMES:  
*DE SPECTACULIS 22***

As an co-author I recently worked upon the introduction and commentary on the Polish translation of Martial's collection of epigrams, the famous *Liber spectaculorum* (*On the Spectacles*), written on the occasion of the inauguration of the *amphitheatrum Flavianum* (later known as *Colosseum*) in the year 80<sup>1</sup>, during the reign of the Emperor Titus<sup>2</sup>. The preparation of the commentary was for many reasons an exceptionally advantageous experience, and one of the most challenging problems that emerged at that time was the question: how was the Romans' attitude towards cruelty?; how to understand their apparent fascination with it? Was it only a terrifying (for us) allure with mayhem, carnage and blood? Should one take it as a macabre grand-guignol entertainment, aimed at enjoying (by presenting the scenes of terror) the voracious *populus Romanus* and bloodthirsty *plebs Romana*, and consequently arranged by the magistrates, politicians or nobles as a tool by which the *editores* gained popularity and wielded power or control – both in the *urbs aeterna* as in other municipal cities? Or, could we ever hope to come nearer to the understanding of the cruel practices by expressing *our* moral judgment: disgust, detestation and rejection, as did openly Michael Grant in his *Gladiators*?<sup>3</sup> How far should historians proceed in their investigations to avoid the risk of falling into an open moralizing? The more questions, the more doubts and uncertainties.

Moral abhorrence, repulsion and condemnation are understandable enough to any sensitive man studying the phenomenon of the Roman *ludi circenses* now<sup>4</sup>:

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\* Dr hab. Bogdan Burliga, prof. UG – Associate Professor of Ancient Literature, Department of Classics, University of Gdańsk; e-mail: filbb@ug.edu.pl. I am heavily indebted to Dr Katarzyna K. Starczewska (Centro de Ciencias Humanas e Sociales, Instituto de Lenguas y Culturas del Mediterráneo y Oriente Próximo, Madrid) for Her help in writing this paper.

<sup>1</sup> All dates refer to AD, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Marcjalis, *Księga widowisk*, transl. K. Różycka-Tomaszuk, introduction and notes M. Zagórski – A. Klęczar – B. Burliga, Wrocław 2015.

<sup>3</sup> London 1967; in a similar vein wrote R. Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization. The Roman Games*, London – New York 1994, 13-14.

<sup>4</sup> T. Wiedemann (*Emperors and Gladiators*, London – New York 1995, 128) says of “revulsion on the part of western scholars”.

as Carlin A. Barton put it, “The Roman fascination with the gladiator confounds’ us”<sup>5</sup> – small wonder, given that together with the Greeks the Romans are the founders of Western civilization – could at the same time have practiced and tolerated so sadistic forms of entertainment. However, in an effort to elucidate Roman *mentalité* – both organizers’ as onlookers’ pathological inclination towards gore and bloodshed – our disgust may also be, I dare tentatively to suggest, a bit disturbing and confusing, rather than helpful in a better understanding of the emotions the urban *profanum vulgus* felt – constantly demanding *panem et circenses*<sup>6</sup> – while gazing the arranged scenes of inflicting real blows that caused real torments<sup>7</sup>. This was correctly recognized by the American archaeologist Shelby Brown who in her highly acclaimed paper has reminded that “To evaluate the violent acts of another culture in an objective way is a difficult, perhaps impossible, task, especially when the acts are completely unacceptable within one’s own society”<sup>8</sup>.

Amid the ancient testimonies of the Roman spectacles (both in the form of separate writings as longer passages, or occasional references) Tertullian’s treatise (written ca. 200)<sup>9</sup>, polemical, vehement in tone and full of prejudices towards the phenomenon analyzed, remains one of the key sources, if not the most valuable one, by far more interesting than the later, short treatise of Novatian, previously ascribed to Pseudo-Cyprian (about 250). It is not so much due to the fact that it gives the most complex treatment of the fascinating subject-matter, presenting an overview of the history of the Roman *munera* and

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<sup>5</sup> C.A. Barton, *The Sorrow of the Ancient Romans. The Gladiator and the Monster*, Princeton 1993, 12; cf. E. Köhne, *Bread and Circuses: The Politics of Entertainment*, in: *Gladiators and Caesars. The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome*, ed. E. Köhne – C. Ewigleben, Berkeley – Los Angeles 2000, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Juvenalis, *Saturae* X 77-81, ed. S. Morton Braund, *Juvenal and Persius*, LCL 91, Cambridge (Mass.) – London 2004, 372: “iam pridem, ex quo suffragia nulli / vendimus, effudit curas; nam qui dabat olim / imperium, fasces, legiones, omnia, nunc se / continet atque duas tantum res anxius optat, / panem et circenses”. On the same claims of the *populus* says Fronto in his epistula to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. In this case Fronto wrote of the Emperor Trajan who knew by which means could be people held in obedience, cf. Marcus Cornelius Fronto, *Principia. Historiae* 17, ed. C.R. Haines, *The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto*, II, LCL 113, Cambridge (Mass.) – London 1988, 216: “qui sciret populum Romanum duabus precipue rebus, annona et spectaculis, teneri”. See R. Stawinoga, *Tertulian a świat antyczny*, Kraków 2002, 106.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. S. Longosz, *Damnati ad bestias*, TST 7 (1979) 86, who gives a list of the examples of the pompous *spectacula*, arranged on a large scale.

<sup>8</sup> S. Brown, *Death as Decoration: Scenes from the Arena on Roman Domestic Mosaics*, in: *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, ed. A. Richlin, Oxford 1992, 180; see the thoughtful discussion by A.W. Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome*, Oxford 1968, 35-51; also E. Gunderson, *The Ideology of Arena*, “Classical Antiquity” 15 (1996) 113-114; cf. D.G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, London – New York 1998, 133-152.

<sup>9</sup> I rely on the edition and translation of R.T. Glover: *Tertullian, Apology. On Spectacles*, Cambridge (Mass.) – London 1977.

other controversial pastimes, although for the students of the social history of the ancient Rome this factor is of fundamental importance, too<sup>10</sup>. What then?

Perhaps the greatest merit of Tertullian is the perspective he adopts, although (a lesser paradox than it might seem) it is, of course, biased and distorted view: he looks at the *ludi* and their fatal influence from the point of view of a spectator, a Christian spectator especially<sup>11</sup>, so demoralization and corruption of Christian soul when watching the shameful and disgraceful scenes are the danger that disturb the author most seriously<sup>12</sup>. As the writer pointedly remarks, it is not easy (if impossible) to remain immune from pernicious influences of what was observed<sup>13</sup>. For these reasons all the public shows are thus – understandably – his obsession, one may say, and remind a later, famous characteristics of the symptoms of addiction when watching the *spectacula*: I mean the lust of viewing the arena amenities and atrocities as described Saint Augustine in his *Confessiones* who recalled the case of his friend Alypius, involuntarily tainted by baleful virus of *libido spectandi*<sup>14</sup>.

Tertullian's vivid interest in the formation of character of a Christian viewer finds its realization in work itself – above all, it remains great warning and appeal to the adherents of the new philosophy. These warnings are crucial, as the author equally condemns both chariot-racing as *ludi scaenici* and *ludi circenses* – these great “shows” of debauchery that permanently corrupt young minds. The result is evil whose source lies in a shameless drive to public exhibition and display of what should be hidden and never showed.

Regarding the latter form of the pageants, one intriguing problem Tertullian was faced with concerns cruelty itself. Apart from its polemical and hostile approach toward the phenomenon of the *spectacula* and *munera* as an opportunity to wreak scandals, roguery, mischief and demoralization<sup>15</sup>, the

<sup>10</sup> Cf. T.P. Wiseman, *The Roman Audience. Classical Literature as Social History*, Oxford 2015, 180.

<sup>11</sup> On which see V. Power, *Tertullian: Father of Clerical Animosity toward the Theatre*, “Educational Theatre Journal” 23 (1971) 36.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 19, ed. R.T. Glover: Tertullian, *Apology. On Spectacles*, Cambridge (Mass.) – London 1977, LCL 250, 278: “publicae voluptatis”.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem 15, LCL 250, 270: “Nam et si qui modeste et probe spectaculis fruitur pro dignitatis vel aetatis vel etiam naturae suae condicione, non tamen immobilis animi est et sine tacita spiritus passione”.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Augustinus, *Confessiones* VI 7-9; Novatianus, *De spectaculis* 5, 4, ed. G.F. Diercks, CCL 4, Turnhout 1972, 171: “vidit tamen, quod committendum non fuit et oculos per idolatriae spectaculum per libidinem duxit”. See D.G. van Slyke, *The Devil and His Pomp in Fifth-Century Carthage: Renouncing Spectacula with Spectacular Imagery*, DOP 59 (2005) 53.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 15, LCL 250, 268-270: “Omne enim spectaculum sine concussione spiritus non est. Ubi enim voluptas, ibi et studium, per quod scilicet voluptas sapit; ubi studium, ibi et aemulatio, perquam studium sapit”, LCL 250, 269-271: “There is no public spectacle without violence to the spirit. For where there is pleasure, there is eagerness, which gives pleasure its flavour. Where there is eagerness, there is rivalry which gives its flavour to eagerness”; Novatianus, *De spectaculis* 4, 2. See G.G. Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena. Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman*

treatise retains the first-rate, indeed priceless value. This value is the result of the fact that the converted Christian thinker from Carthage tries to understand the fascinations of raging, savage crowd<sup>16</sup>, and to find logic behind the Roman “philosophy” of making such ferocious public performances. It is thus the perspective of man looking at the brutal sports from a moral distance but – at the same time – with a bit of curiosity; it brings a view of someone who tries to capture the reasons for which the ostentatious rituals of bloody amphitheatrical shows are constantly repeated. Seeking to explain the attitude the organizers and crowd display towards the gladiators and prisoners sentenced to death<sup>17</sup>, Tertullian finds a reasonable explanation, although he cannot accept it. From his point of view, naturally, “Roman mind” works beyond a rationale because of the simple fact: a strange (pseudo)logic in a simultaneous humiliation and admiration of gladiators and other performers is the result of the Romans’ twisted ethical assumptions. Such diagnosis rings today as an obvious statement, even trivial. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that it was Tertullian who – as far as the sources allow us to prove – was able to see acutely the social phenomenon of the circus games in a new light.

The passage where such authorial reflection is issued is the chapter 22 of the *De spectaculis*. This is a fine literary piece, carefully constructed and based on the rhetorical juxtaposition of contradictions. It is preceded by a general observation in §19, where *amphitheatrum* is equated with *saevitia*, *impietas*, *feritas* and *humanus sanguis* – all these emotions serve in turn to *voluptates* as all the three forms of spectacles<sup>18</sup> are *species voluptatis*. What is worth considering and strikes Tertullian especially is an illogical (for him) attitude to the “stage performers” (gladiators, chariot-drivers and actors alike).

The source of such a bizarre treatment on the part of the *auctores et administratores spectaculorum* is their lack of ethical knowledge of what is good and what is not<sup>19</sup>. In such a situation the Romans are led by perverse and distorted ethical foundations<sup>20</sup>. As a result, the pagans lack *constantia* and in practice are guided and led astray by *inconstantia*. As Tertullian argues, this is by no

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*Games*, Cambridge – New York 2011, 232-240. It goes without saying that Tertullian leaves without a comment what the modern commentators and sociologists stress out: a social importance of making the *spectacula* as a means of political and social control of the masses; cf. K. Hopkins, *Murderous Games*, in: idem, *Death and Renewal. Sociological Studies in Roman History*, II, Cambridge 1983, 17-19; also D.G. Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, Malden (Mass.) – Oxford 2007, 342.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 16, LCL 250, 270-272.

<sup>17</sup> He does not deny the necessity to punish the wrongdoers at all. What does he instead appeal to is to stop making such punishment public spectacles, organized in order to provide a perverse joy of the viewers, cf. Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 19, LCL 250, 278.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 9-12.

<sup>19</sup> Let us observe that at this place the author does not say of the crowd. He seems to imply that the *plebs* is only led by the organizers and managers.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 21, LCL 250, 282: “malum et bonum pro arbitrio et libidine interpretantur: alibi bonum quod alibi malum, et alibi malum quod alibi bonum”, LCL 250, 283:

means surprising, because where the status of good and evil is unsettled, there these concepts have no real validity<sup>21</sup>, and one only may therefore say of “the fickleness of feeling (*inconstantia sensus*)”<sup>22</sup> and “the wavering of judgment (*varietas iudicii*)”<sup>23</sup>. It is exactly this kind of reasoning that comments the Romans’ strange attitude towards all those who became the object of spectacles – “the charioteers, players, athletes, gladiators (*quadrigarios scaenicos xysticos arenarios*)”<sup>24</sup>. Read today, it is difficult to not agree with the Carthaginian’s acute reflection; as an explanation his diagnosis remains essentially pertinent.

Consequently, while analyzing the phenomenon of the *circus*, *theatrum* and *arena*, Tertullian observes a lot of paradoxes with regard to the relations between organizers/viewers and performers. As he pointedly remarks, those who are “most loving of men (*illos amantissimos*)”<sup>25</sup> are in fact despised by the organizers; along with a fascination with the souls and bodies of men appearing publicly a great lot of contempt, disdain and scorn is observed, in fact – “on one and the same account they glorify them and they degrade and diminish them (*ex eadem arte, qua magnificiunt, deponunt et deminunt*)”<sup>26</sup> which only means that it is a highly noxious fascination, totally set upside down<sup>27</sup>, as its source lies in the Romans’ wish to abase and humiliate the others [“for whose sake they commit the sins they blame (*propter quos se in ea committunt quae reprehendunt*)”<sup>28</sup>]. Familiar with the classical rhetoric as he was, Tertullian continues to present a number of further, fine *figurae sententiarum* – oxymorons. So, he claims, both the *editores* as *populus* act incoherently:

“[they] [...] love whom they lower; they despise whom they approve; the art they glorify, the artist they disgrace (*Amant quos multant, depretiant quos probant, artem magnificant, artificem notant*)”<sup>29</sup>.

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“So they construe evil and good to square with their own judgement and pleasure; sometimes a thing is good that at other times is bad, and the same with evil, now evil now good”.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibidem* 22, LCL 250, 282: “Inaequata ista hominum miscentium et commutantium statum boni et mali”, LCL 250, 283: “These are the inconsistencies of men; it is thus they confuse and interchange the nature of good and evil”. The passage is also quoted by Brent Shaw, *The Passion of Perpetua*, “Past & Present” 10 (1990) 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem* 22, LCL 250, 284.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> In order to clarify these perverse moral standards, accepted by the participants of the *spectacula* as ordinary, Tertullian inserts in the chapter 21 a few examples of behavior that in everyday would be perceived by the same viewers as a distasteful deviation from the norm. His observation agrees with his another excellent characterization of the *spectacula* in the *Apologeticum* (38, 4, ed. R.T. Haines, LCL 250, 172) where the reader is told of “insania circi, impudicitia theatri and atrocitas arenae”.

<sup>28</sup> On the prejudices of the Roman mob see Fagan, *Lure of Arena*, p. 155-180.

<sup>29</sup> Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 22, LCL 250, 284-285.

Tertulian thus wonders and is far from understanding why “a man should be blackened for what he shines in (*Quale iudicium est, ut ob ea quis offusce-tur, per quae promeretur?*)”<sup>30</sup>. In fact, for the apologist such an attitude is the proof of a great perversity of the Romans (a famous exclamation – *Quanta perversitas!*)<sup>31</sup>, and a confession that things are evil (*quanta confessio est ma-lae rei!*)<sup>32</sup>. Another clear, perhaps the most emphatic, sign of such perversity is the treatment of the “performers” outside the *arena*. They are totally excluded from the Roman public and communal life:

“they openly condemn them to disgrace and civil degradation; they keep them religiously excluded from council chamber, rostrum, senate, knighthood, and every other kind of office and a good many distinctions (*immo manifeste dam-nant ignominia et capitis minutione, arcentes curia rostris senatu equite ce-terisque honoribus omnibus simul et ornamentis quibusdam*)”<sup>33</sup>.

The above comments, brief as they are, remain nonetheless hard to over-estimate. To be sure, an inestimable value of Tertullian’s treatise concerning Roman public games rests on preserving of plenty of priceless historical data and details, but not only his open rejection and condemnation of the most popular form of the Roman entertainments (which, understandably, prevails in the work) are important, especially for the modern historian of the early Christian polemics with the traditional Roman ethics. In my juxtaposition of the chapters 21-22 I have tried to suggest that in his attempt at understanding the intentions of the Roman elite (that’s, the organizers) and mob as well the Carthaginian convert has said something significant as he perspicaciously has found that the sources of the fascination with cruelty and bloodshed that the Romans betray lay in their opaque conceptions of what is morally good and what is vice. Leaving aside a highly immoral, indeed destructive character of the public *spectacula* for the character and morale of a viewer, Tertullian aptly endeavors to point out that the Roman fascination with *spectacula* is in fact deeply rooted in a profound debasement and contempt of all those occur-ring before the audience<sup>34</sup>. His conclusion, although never expressed openly

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, LCL 250, 284-285.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, LCL 250, 284.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem. On this see G. Ville, *La gladiature en occident des origines à la mort de Domitien*, Rome 1981, 228-230.

<sup>33</sup> Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 22, LCL 250, 284-285.

<sup>34</sup> For Tertullian this is also obvious in the case of gladiators, although modern experts would rather emphasize that majority of them fought voluntarily. So, according to M.J. Carter, *Gladiatorial Combat: The Rules of Engagement*, “Classical Journal” 102 (2006-2007) 112, the goal of gladiatorial combats was “victory, not murder”. As he reminds, the case of *munera* was all the same something different from mere executions *ad ludum* and *ad bestias*. This being so, for Tertullian this would be certainly a weak argument, as he stresses out an unnatural character of the situation itself: a degrad-ing performance in front of others. The degradation of the performers was a *conditio sine qua non* of the public shows, a *raison d’être* of the amusement of the spectators.

in such a way in the treatise, is nevertheless that if there was really on the part of the onlookers a kind of fascination, such feeling is indeed very perfunctory. The reason is simple: the superficiality of such an allure is based on sadism, not any true admiration for the performers<sup>35</sup>. It is a result of a peculiar situation that public shows and public space (that's, amphitheatre) create; in other words – it is a product of a temporary excitement only<sup>36</sup>. What counts most in such cases is the *actio* itself, a public, sanguineous “ritual”: real harming, real killing, real pain, and lastly, real agony and dying (not a death itself) – it is all these elements that are observed and commented passionately by the mob. Generally, Tertullian seems to conclude, it is not the men experiencing all that who are important; it is not so much their suffering that matters. Far from it. What matters is the opportunity to look, an observation of men's reaction in the face of deadly danger, let it be another gladiator or wild beast.

This leads us to the conclusion: Tertullian's highly reserved, hostile voice of the Roman public entertainments stands out the more evidently the more is compared with non-Christian observers, to recall only Martial as the most reliable witness<sup>37</sup>. If any other testimony, Martial's small anthology of epigrams proves that peculiar, perverse excitement of the Romans with the visual aspects of pain the others are experiencing, as he repeats it – *vidimus*<sup>38</sup>. It was this aspect of the *ludi* that remained unacceptable, perhaps the most immoral too, for the Christian commentator. The making of a public entertainment in which human pain became a spectacle and the source of excitement certainly brought a lot of joy to its onlookers. But Tertullian is mainly interested in disastrous effects of such joy as it irreversibly harms the character of a viewer<sup>39</sup>. By the way, however, he is also trying to enter the way of thinking of the organizers. What he detects on this occasion is a fathomless, indeed abysmal scorn.

<sup>35</sup> Which, of course did not stand in any opposition to the fascination with gladiators and actors especially, even from the representatives of the upper strata of society, including women.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Fagan, *Lure of Arena*, p. 202-207.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. K.M. Coleman, *General Introduction*, in: M. Valerii Martialis *Liber Spectaculorum*, Oxford 2006, lxxix-lxxx.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Tertullianus, *De spectaculis* 6, 2; 8, 4; also 9, 3.

<sup>39</sup> A sentiments similar to these expressed Seneca in a famous letter VII, on the crowds, addressed to Lucilius (Seneca, *Epistula VII*, ed. and transl. R.M. Gummere *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*, I, LCL 75, Cambridge (Mass.) – London 1929, 28-36). It cannot be excluded that Tertullian knew this letter; cf. K. Mammel, *Ancient Critics of Roman Spectacle and Sport*, in: *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. P. Christesen – D.G. Kyle, Malden (Mass.) – Oxford – Chichester 2014, 606. But I suspect that the majority of the Roman aristocracy reacted with a lot of understanding and indifference: spectacles were the reality they lived with; some of them attended the bloody competitions willingly, in others the gruesome views caused weariness, see Marcus Aurelius, *Ad se ipsum* 6, 46; 7, 68; 8, 10; cf. B. Burliga, *The Romanitas of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations*, “Studia Elbląskie” 13 (2012) 90.

TERTULIAN O PARADOKSIE RZYMSKICH IGRZYSK  
AMFITEATRALNYCH: *O WIDOWISKACH* 22

(Streszczenie)

Tematem artykułu jest ciekawy paradoks, o jakim mówi Tertulian w rozdziale 22. swego traktatu *O widowiskach*. Jest rzeczą wiadomą, że stanowisko tego żarliwego obrońcy wiary chrześcijańskiej było jak najbardziej nieprzychylnie dawnej rzymskiej instytucji walk na arenie, wyścigów konnych i przedstawień scenicznych – Tertulian widział w nich niebezpieczeństwo i zagrożenie dla moralności chrześcijan. Przy okazji zwrócił on również uwagę na samo podejście Rzymian do walczących i skazańców, wskazując na sprzeczność w postawie tak organizatorów, jak i tłumów oglądających spektakle. Z jednej strony, walczący byli dla tłumów bohaterami areny, z drugiej ludźmi jednocześnie pogardzanymi i wyszydzanymi, zmuszanymi do upokarzających występów. Przyczynę takiego stanu rzeczy autor trafnie dostrzega w braku utrwalonych wzorców etycznych u Rzymian, w swoistym pomieszaniu pojęć dobra i zła. Instytucjami, które utrwały taki stan rzeczy, były właśnie publiczne formy rozrywki.

**Key words:** Tertullian, the Romans, spectacle, games, arena, mentalité, cruelty.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Tertulian, Rzymianie, igrzyska, arena, mentalność, okrucieństwo.

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