Spartacus
Film and History

Edited by

Martin M. Winkler



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Introduction

Martin M. Winkler

CRASSUS: There, boy, is Rome! The might, the majesty, the terror of Rome. There is the power that bestrides the known world like a colossus. No man can withstand Rome.

SPARTACUS: When just one man says "No, I won't," Rome begins to fear. And we were tens of thousands who said no. That was the wonder of it.

Among Hollywood's epic films set in ancient Rome, *Spartacus* (1960) stands out for a number of reasons. It had been a pet project for its producer and star, Kirk Douglas. It dealt with a topic that was politically suspicious to many when it was released. It was based on a novel by left-wing author Howard Fast, who had been imprisoned for his political views. Its principal screenwriter was Dalton Trumbo, who had been blacklisted for many years. It had a troubled production history that involved clashes between and among various parties concerning the script and the presentation of the film's hero. It was off to a shaky start when Douglas fired its original director, Anthony Mann, who had supervised preproduction and actually begun filming, and continued to have problems between Douglas and Mann's replacement, a young Stanley Kubrick. It ran into censorship troubles, was re-edited, and was exhibited for decades in truncated versions before being restored in 1991 to a form approximating but not identical to its original version. It was also one of the most

expensive films made up to that time. (Its cost of $12,000,000 exceeded by three quarters of a million the price for which the entire studio was sold while the film was in production.) In subsequent years, *Spartacus* acquired a large following for its exceptional status among the works of a director who had become a cult figure and one of the most influential as well as idiosyncratic filmmakers only a few years later. And *Spartacus* dealt with a short but important episode in Roman history about which ancient sources are comparatively scarce but which, in part as a result of this circumstance, led to the birth of a legend that proved to be highly potent in Europe and America from the seventeenth century on. So the place of *Spartacus* as an unusual film set in antiquity is secure, and not only among aficionados of epic cinema or cultural historians. Its theme, summarized in the two quotations above, is of timeless appeal. So are the film and the period in Roman history on which it is based.

It is not necessary here to trace the literary, artistic, or political ramifications of the legend of Spartacus. Kubrick's film became the legend's most popular restatement in the second half of the twentieth century. Its modern development is, on the whole, well documented.[1] In the twenti-

1 See in particular the following works, all with additional references: Richard G. Lillard, "Through the Disciplines with Spartacus: The Uses of a Hero in History and the Media," *American Studies*, 16 no. 2 (1975), 15–28; Antonio Guarino, *Spartaco: Analisi di un mito* (Naples: Liguori, 1979); Wolfgang Zeev Rubinsohn, *Spartacus' Uprising and Soviet Historical Writing*, tr. John G. Griffith (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1983); Roberto Orena, *Rivolta e rivoluzione: Il* Bellum *di Spartaco nella crisi della repubblica e la riflessione storiografica moderna* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1984); Wolfgang Schuller, "Spartacus heute," in *Antike in der Moderne*, ed. Wolfgang Schuller (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1985), 289–305; Anton J. van Hooff, *Spartacus: De vonk van Spartacus: Het voortleven van een antieke rebel* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1992); *Spartacus and the Slave Wars: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Brent D. Shaw (Boston and New York: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2001), 1–29 (editor's introduction); and Theresa Urbainczyk, *Spartacus* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2004), 106–117 and 132–133 (notes; chapter entitled "Spartacus in the Modern Imagination"). I quote, *exempli gratia*, the verdict on Spartacus by Karl Marx in a letter of February 27, 1861, to Friedrich Engels: "Spartacus erscheint als der famoseste Kerl, den die ganze antike Geschichte aufzuweisen hat. Großer General (kein Garibaldi), nobler Character, real representative [sic – in English] des antiken Proletariats" ("Spartacus appears to be the most capital fellow that all of ancient history can show for itself. Great general [not a Garibaldi], a noble character, real representative of the ancient proletariat"). Marx mentioned in the same letter that he read about Spartacus in Appian (in Greek) and considered his work to be a very valuable book. Quoted from *Karl Marx–Friedrich Engels: Werke* (Berlin: Dietz, 1974), vol. 30, 159–160; quotation at 160. Cf. H. T. Wallinga, *Der famoseste Kerl: Over Spartacus en zijn opstand* (Utrecht: Faculteit der Letteren, Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1990).– For modern research tools on ancient slavery see Wolfgang Zeev Rubinsohn, *Die großen Sklavenaufstände der Antike: 500 Jahre Forschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993), and especially *Bibliographie zur antiken Sklaverei*, ed. Heinz Bellen and Heinz Heinen; rev.

eth century the legend received a new boost when the cinema turned to telling Spartacus' story, usually with little regard to the historical Spartacus. The cinematic process of myth-making about Spartacus culminated in Kubrick's film. Once Hollywood has appropriated a historical subject, the factual past takes a back seat to the dream factory's power of shaping our imagination. In the words of screenwriter and historical novelist Gore Vidal: "In the end, he who screens the history makes the history."[2] When history has become legend, screen the legend. He who screens the legend keeps the legend alive in the most effective way of all, for, as director Mann once said, "legend makes the very best cinema. It excites the imagination more."[3] As a result, historical films tend to supersede our knowledge of historical facts, not least when lavish spectacles made at million-dollar expense and with the proverbial cast of thousands dazzle our senses. A film like *Spartacus* stirs our emotions to identify ourselves with its hero and his cause. Even better if such a film can be marketed, as was *Spartacus*, with Hollywood's customary hyperbole but also with some justification as "the thinking man's epic."

Throughout the present book and in virtually all publications about *Spartacus*, the film is identified as or referred to as Kubrick's. This is in keeping with a general, and sensible, convention of identifying films by the names of their officially credited directors. Nevertheless, in the case of *Spartacus* we should also be aware of the uncredited contributions by its original director. Anthony Mann provided a brief summary of his work on the film in an interview given shortly before his death in 1967:

> Kirk Douglas was the producer of *Spartacus*: he wanted to stress the 'message' of the picture. I figured the 'message' would be conveyed better by showing *physically* the full horror of slavery. A film has to be visual. Too much dialogue will kill it . . . From that point on, Kirk and I were in disagreement . . . I worked nearly three weeks actually directing and all the opening sequence is mine; the slaves on the mountain, Peter Ustinov [Batiatus] examining Kirk Douglas's teeth, the arrival at the gladiators' school and the opposition of Charles McGraw [Marcellus the trainer]. As for the rest, the film follows my shooting script faithfully right up to the escape.[4]

by Dorothea Schäfer and Johannes Deissler; 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2003). Additional scholarship is cited in several chapters and collected in the bibliography of the present book.

2 Gore Vidal, *Screening History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 81.

3 Quoted from Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, "Interviews with Anthony Mann," *Screen*, 10 no. 4 (1969), 32–54, at 41.

4 Quoted from Jean-Claude Missiaen, "Conversation with Anthony Mann," tr. Martyn Auty, *Framework*, 15–17 (1981), 17–20; quotations at 19.