Spartacus
Film and History

Edited by
Martin M. Winkler
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American poster for Michele Lupo’s La vendetta di Spartacus (The Revenge of Spartacus, 1965), one of several Italian films inspired by and cashing in on Spartacus. The medallions of the principal actors are patterned on those for Kubrick’s film.

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A typical moment in gladiator cinema, here from Michele Lupo’s Gli schiavi più forti del mondo (Seven Slaves against the World, 1964). The film’s plot is indebted to that of Spartacus.

This still from Nunzio Malasomma’s La rivolta degli schiavi (The Revolt of the Slaves, 1961), a loose remake of Alessandro Blasetti’s Fabiola (1951), shows that not all Italian epics have to shun comparison with the Hollywood product.
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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-

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eth century the legend received a new boost when the cinema turned to
telling Spartacus’ story, usually with little regard to the historical Sparta-
cus. The cinematic process of myth-making about Spartacus culmi-
nated 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.”  

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.”  

As a result, historical films tend to super-
sede 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 our-
selves with its hero and his cause. Even better if such a film can be mar-
keted, 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 dis-
agreement . . . I worked nearly three weeks actually directing and all the
opening sequence is mine; the slaves on the mountain, Peter Ustinov [Batia-
tus] 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.

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

3 Quoted from Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, “Interviews with Anthony
4 Quoted from Jean-Claude Missiaen, “Conversation with Anthony Mann,” tr. Martyn
The finished film’s evident qualities, some of which may be traced back to Mann, and the resonances it has found among viewers, however, tend to disguise a number of considerable shortcomings. An important reason for these is the fact that Kubrick, a fiercely independent-minded auteur and an artist obsessed with every detail of his work, had no decisive control over Spartacus after replacing Mann and was displeased with the result: “I am disappointed in the film. It had everything but a good story.”

Kubrick consistently disowned Spartacus – unlike all his other films. As he put it in 1968:

*Spartacus* . . . was the only film that I did not have control over, and which, I feel, was not enhanced by that fact. It all really just came down to the fact that there are thousands of decisions that have to be made, and that if you don’t make them yourself, and if you’re not on the same wavelength as the people who are making them, it becomes a very painful experience, which it was. Obviously I directed the actors, composed the shots and cut the film, so that, within the weakness of the story, I tried to do the best I could . . . The only film [of mine] that I don’t like is *Spartacus*.

We can, of course, sympathize with Kubrick and, now looking back over his complete body of work, understand that Spartacus is not really “a Kubrick.” The fact that a number of scenes in the screenplay were shortened or eliminated only exacerbates the problem. For example, the scenes dealing with Roman politics are largely unconvincing as they now appear on the screen. The filmmakers faced a dilemma commonly found in many historical films: to make a highly sophisticated system of government whose complexities are familiar only to specialists understandable to a lay audience – or at least convincingly to present an ancient government to modern viewers. This problem is most obvious in the machinations of Senator Gracchus, the antagonist of Marcus Crassus, the film’s villain. Gracchus must be shown as being able to manipulate the senate in general and Crassus’ protégé and henchman Glabrus in

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7 On this aspect of the film see in particular Duncan L. Cooper, “Who Killed the Legend of Spartacus? Production, Censorship, and Reconstruction of Stanley Kubrick’s Epic Film” in this volume.
particular in order to win a round against Crassus. Gracchus succeeds when he has the senate send arrogant and incompetent Glabrus against Spartacus. Glabrus is duly defeated, and his humiliation causes a serious setback to Crassus. But how likely is it that none of the senators, most of them presumably experienced and wily politicians, sees through Gracchus’ strategies whereas audiences, most of them presumably not experienced and wily politicians, do – as they must in order to be able to follow the future power struggles of Crassus, Gracchus, and Julius Caesar and the eventual fall of Gracchus? Even in the truncated version of his part that we have now, Charles Laughton gives an unforgettable performance as Gracchus, but viewers who remember him only two years after Spartacus in his greatest political role, again as a wily senator but this time an American one in Otto Preminger’s political drama Advise and Consent, will realize what his Gracchus could have been like if Spartacus had indeed had a better story. So the film’s assessment by Peter Ustinov, who as Batiatus had a memorable scene with Laughton shortly before Gracchus’ suicide, is unfortunately too good to be quite true: “Spartacus was a film with an extraordinarily rich mixture and as full of intrigue as a Balkan government in the good old days.”8 If only Ustinov were right! His characterization of Laughton is apt to reinforce viewers’ regrets about Spartacus: “Laughton [was] the man of concessions, who regarded acting as part art and part whoring. He had sold his soul to Hollywood in a way, but had kept a grip on his impenetrable integrity through thick and thin . . . he was surrounded by things of beauty, which were parts of his soul translated.”9 With only minor substitutions, these words describe Laughton the actor as much as Gracchus the politician, whose sense of beauty the film well illustrates by giving his villa the famous Roman fresco cycle of wall paintings from the Villa of the Mysteries.

Still, Kubrick’s mastery of cinematic technique and art could not completely be suppressed, not even on his first project on such a gigantic scale. What one of the actors said about Kubrick is worth keeping in mind:

Some people thought Kubrick was an odd choice [to direct Spartacus] because he had a kind of cynical approach. I thought he was brilliant. He understood human frailty . . . Universal . . . wouldn’t give him room to move . . . he always wanted that scope, and he had to really maneuver to

8 Peter Ustinov, Dear Me (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown / Atlantic Monthly Press, 1977), 299. The quotation is the first sentence of his chapter on Spartacus in this autobiography.
9 Ustinov, Dear Me, 300–301.
get *Spartacus* made. He was a genius with the camera, but as far as I was concerned, Stanley’s greatest effectiveness was in his one-on-one relationships with actors . . . Almost everybody treated Kubrick [with hostility or contempt]. They had no idea who they were dealing with. Later on they’d lionize and canonize him at Universal and everywhere else, but not in those days.10

As scholars have demonstrated, *Spartacus* fits in with Kubrick’s other films in more than its style. One of them concludes:

In representing the rebellious slaves as a concretization of man’s efforts to resist dehumanization throughout human history, *Spartacus* fits thematically into Kubrick’s total canon of films better than most critics of his work are prepared to admit. Spartacus was vanquished by the technological superiority of Roman military tactics, and man will continue in Kubrick’s films . . . to resist being overpowered by his own ever increasing technological advances.

Moreover, *Spartacus* has a further thematic affinity with Kubrick’s other pictures in that once more a man has devised an apparently foolproof plan which fails in the end through a mixture of unforeseen chance happenings and human frailty . . . In a Kubrick film human weakness and/or malice along with chance are always standing in the wings ready to disrupt the best-laid plans that his heroes or anti-heroes can devise.

Hence *Spartacus* seems to be more than a marginal film in Kubrick’s career, although it could well have been a better picture all around had Kubrick been allowed to exercise the artistic control that he has enjoyed on all of his other films.11

One particular scene in *Spartacus* may serve as an illustration of Kubrick’s genius with the camera and in the editing room. It is one of the most famous in the entire film and has inspired a variety of imitations, a clear sign of its impact.12 The idea of human solidarity is a fundamen-
tal part of Spartacus’ legend and helps explain his worldwide appeal. Its highest expression in the film occurs after the decisive defeat of the slaves by the overwhelming might of the Roman military colossus. Asked to identify Spartacus, the survivors all claim to be him: “I’m Spartacus! I’m Spartacus!”

Kubrick sarcastically expressed some of his frustration with Spartacus in his immediately following film when he referred viewers specifically to this moment. In the first scene of Lolita (1962), Humbert Humbert asks his nemesis Clare Quilty, who has a white bed sheet draped over one shoulder and arm like a cinematic Roman: “Are you Quilty?” He receives the reply: “No, I’m Spartacus. Have you come to free the slaves or something?” Absurdly, Quilty then proposes “a lovely game of Roman ping pong – like two civilized senators. Roman ping – you’re supposed to say ‘Roman pong’.” Some faux-classical decorations are visible in the background of this scene. Almost a decade later, Kubrick satirized the genre of Roman and biblical epics in one of Alex’s fantasies in A Clockwork Orange (1971). Nevertheless, the inherent quality of the Spartacus scene becomes evident if we turn to two modern parallels, one fictional and one historical. Both involve World War II. The same year in which Spartacus was released, Otto Preminger’s Exodus, an epic about the foundation of Israel in the 1940s and written, like Spartacus, by Dalton Trumbo, contained a scene in which a young Jewish girl tells of an incident that had occurred in Denmark:

When the Nazis marched into Denmark, they ordered every Jew to wear a yellow armband with the Star of David on it . . . The next morning, when every Jew in Denmark had to wear his armband, King Christian came out of Amalienborg Palace for his morning ride. And do you know something? He wore the Star of David on his arm . . . And you know something else? By afternoon, everybody was wearing Stars of David, Jews and Danes and, well, just everybody.13

This is a well-known story, told repeatedly and in slightly different versions, but it is not true. By contrast, Frederic Raphael, who wrote the screenplay for Kubrick’s last film, Eyes Wide Shut (1999), recalls a conversation he had once had with him about Spartacus:

13 A late scene in Exodus contains another reminiscence of Spartacus’ history. To evacuate a small village that is expecting a night attack by a superior enemy, the film’s hero has, among other things, fires built to deceive the enemy into thinking that he has more people to fight back than are really present; they then slip away under cover of darkness. Cf. Sallust, Histories 3.96 (Maurenbrecher) = 3.64 (McGushin), and Frontinus, Strategies 1.15.22.
I singled out the scene where Crassus calls on the slaves to identify the man Spartacus and (supposedly) save their own lives by doing so. I told him how, the previous New Year’s Eve, Sylvia [Mrs. Raphael] and I had been on a train to Colchester with a man who had been in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. At some point, in 1942 or 1943, the S.S. had paraded all the English prisoners and ordered any Jews to take one step forward. One or two did so. The S.S. officer yelled out that if there were any others, they had better admit it by the time he had counted to three. The menace in his voice somehow alerted the prisoners to what might happen to the few Jews who were being singled out. One, two . . . at the shout of three, all the prisoners stepped forward. “Pretty good scene,” Kubrick said.14

Kubrick’s casual comment is in keeping with his attitude to Spartacus, but Raphael’s anecdote shows that Kubrick’s verdict is too harsh. This one moment in Spartacus best illustrates its appeal. Through its epic scale and because of its popularity as a film by Kubrick and with an unusually distinguished cast, it has eclipsed all other Spartacus films made before or after.15 And it has been a major source of inspiration for the one recent film that all by itself brought the genre of Hollywood’s ancient epics back to the silver screen decades after their demise. Ridley Scott’s Gladiator

15 These are: Spartaco (1909, dir. Oreste Gherardini?), Spartaco (1911, dir. Ernesto Maria Pasquali), Spartaco (before 1912, dir. Filoteo Alberini?), Spartaco (1912, dir. Roberto Chiosso), Spartaco: Il gladiatore della Tracia (1913, dir. Giovanni Enrico Vidali), Spartaco (1953, dir. Riccardo Freda; English titles: Sins of Rome, Sins of Rome: Story of Spartacus, Spartacus the Gladiator), Il figlio di Spartacus (1963, dir. Sergio Corbucci; English titles: Son of Spartacus, The Slave), La vendetta di Spartacus (1965, dir. Michele Lupo; English title: The Revenge of Spartacus), Il gladiatore che sfidò l’impero (1965, dir. Domenico Paolella; English title: Challenge of the Gladiator), Spartacus (2004, dir. Robert Dornhelm; with exteriors filmed in Bulgaria, modern Thrace). All films except for this last, an American television film based on Fast’s novel, were produced in Italy. On them cf. in general Maria Wyke, Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 34–56. Correct information about the silent films, not all of which seem to have survived, is difficult to obtain; sources often contradict each other. The films made in the 1960s have little (or less) to do with Spartacus. Nick Nostro’s film Gli invincibili dieci gladiatori (1964; literally: “The Ten Invincible Gladiators”) was a sequel to Gianfranco Parolini’s I dieci gladiatori (1963; English titles: Ten Desperate Men, The Ten Gladiators) but was marketed outside Italy with Spartacus’ name added to its title for greater commercial appeal (in English: Spartacus and the Ten Gladiators). The Russian Spartak or Spartakus (1977), directed by Vadim Derbenyov and Yuri Grigorovich, is the first film of Aram Khachaturian’s ballet of 1954, albeit in a condensed version. An adaptation of Arthur Koestler’s novel The Gladiators, to be called The Gladiators or Spartacus and to be directed by Martin Ritt from a screenplay by Abraham Polonsky, was abandoned in preproduction. Ritt and Polonsky were both victims of the blacklist.
(2000) exhibits numerous plot and character similarities to *Spartacus*. So *Spartacus* deserves a re-evaluation both critical and sympathetic.

*Spartacus: Film and History* presents a new assessment of the film from a variety of perspectives. As such, it is a companion volume to the one I have edited on *Gladiator*.\(^\text{16}\) But the complex history of *Spartacus*, an integral aspect of the film’s qualities and weaknesses, made a somewhat different editorial approach advisable. Films are visual texts. Like works of literature, they tell stories, if predominantly in images and not in words. But as visual narratives films are capable of analysis, interpretation, and criticism from literary points of view. We may term such an approach *film philology*.\(^\text{17}\) To do justice to any literary or filmic text, scholars must be closely familiar with it: with its content, contexts, origin, reception, and existing scholarship. Only then can they interpret or evaluate it. Since films are now an integral part of high-school, college, and university curricula, teachers have a special responsibility to know their “texts,” for only then can they appropriately incorporate them into their courses. In the case of *Spartacus*, such an approach calls for close familiarity with all the basics of this film’s complicated production history, with the different versions in which it was released, and with its eventual restoration.\(^\text{18}\) So the present volume opens with two contributions on the production of the film and its subsequent fate, even going beyond its restoration by pointing us to a version that would take us as closely as possible to the original intention of its principal makers. The other contributors examine several historical and film-historical aspects of *Spartacus*. The film should also be seen and evaluated alongside the

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\(^{18}\) Just as literary scholars base their research and teaching on authoritative editions of their texts, often with commentary and supplemental materials, film philologists are called upon to do the same wherever possible. In the case of *Spartacus*, such an edition is readily available on DVD from the Criterion Collection (#105). It contains extensive supplements and supersedes all other extant versions.
historical record, so translations of the principal sources about Spartacus complement the essays. The ancient texts will guide readers interested in comparing history and film or in tracing the changes that may occur when the past is adapted to a popular medium of the present. Two excerpts from the souvenir book of *Spartacus*, an unusual specimen of such programs, are included as well. By no means does the present book exhaust the variety of approaches to the historical, cultural, or textual aspects of *Spartacus* that are possible; they are intended to point all readers but especially scholars, teachers, and students in the direction of further work on this film and on its historical foundations, whether ancient or modern.

Historical films – just like historical plays, operas, novels, or paintings – are by nature fictional to varying degrees. It is therefore necessary to turn to the question of what the historical Spartacus intended to achieve with his revolt. Like Hannibal before him, the legendary Spartacus is often believed to have come close to overthrowing Rome and abolishing slavery. The Spartacus of our film presents us with an instance of this view, notwithstanding the extensive discussions, even quarrels, among

19 *Spartacus: The Illustrated Story of the Motion Picture Production*, ed. Stan Margulies (Bryna Productions and Universal Pictures Studios, 1960).


21 On the often controversial topic of the presentation of the past in the present, and on *Gladiator* as a specific example, see my comments in “Gladiator and the Traditions of Historical Cinema,” in *Gladiator: Film and History*, 16–30, where I provide references to scholarship on history and film in general. Cf. further my short outline “Quomodo stemma *Gladiatoris pelliculae more philologico sit constituendum.*” *American Journal of Philology*, 124 (2003), 137–141.
some of its creative personnel over what they called the “large” and the “small” Spartacus. But such a view of Spartacus is anachronistic and does not do justice to the real Spartacus and his people. But then, even the ancients, in retrospect, could not fully understand the reasons why the revolt of Spartacus spread as widely and as quickly as it did and why Spartacus was able to achieve so many victories against great odds. St. Augustine commented on this in his *City of God*, written A.D. 413–426, in the context of an overview of slave wars and civil wars:

Then followed a slave war and civil wars. What battles were fought, what blood was shed so that almost all the Italic tribes, among whom the Roman empire had the greatest power, could be subdued as if they were the savage lands of barbarians! Now, the way in which the slave war arose from only very few gladiators (that is, fewer than seventy), to what a large number of fierce and cruel slaves it grew, which generals of the Roman people that number defeated, which cities and areas it devastated and how it did so – all this historians have scarcely been able to explain satisfactorily.22

Confusion about Spartacus and about his achievements and goals is therefore almost unavoidable. But the consensus of modern historians about Spartacus’ goals is significantly different from what the legendary or cinematic Spartacus wants to achieve. I cite two scholars at some length to emphasize this important point. The first is an authority on Roman republican history in general:

It causes no surprise that Marxist historians and writers have idealized Spartacus as a champion of the masses and leader of the one genuine social revolution in Roman history. That, however, is excessive. Spartacus and his companions sought to break the bonds of their own grievous oppression. There is no sign that they were motivated by ideological considerations to overturn the social structure. The sources make clear that Spartacus endeavored to bring his forces out of Italy toward freedom rather than to reform or reverse Roman society. The achievements of Spartacus are no less formidable for that. The courage, tenacity, and ability of the Thracian gladiator who held Roman forces at bay for some two years and built a handful of followers into an assemblage of over 120,000 men can only inspire admiration. . . . But no suggestion emerges anywhere in the sources that the rebels were motivated by idealistic dreams of the equality of slave and free; still less that they aimed at an overthrow and

reconstruction of the social order. Their activities pointed toward self-liberation and escape from Italy.23

The second scholar is an expert on ancient slavery. He reaches an almost identical conclusion:

The severities of slavery...hardly stand in need of further emphasis. It does, however, require stress that the escalation of the revolt of gladiators into a sustained war of servile resistance cannot possibly have been what Spartacus and his immediate companions had hoped to achieve when they made their escape from Capua...The desire to avoid incarceration, to gain liberty, and to take revenge for injuries suffered is comprehensible enough in sheer human terms. But no matter how similarly arduous the living conditions of other slaves, there is no evidence to suggest that Spartacus and his followers...purposely set out from the beginning to raise a general rebellion of slaves throughout central and southern Italy. Indeed, the peculiarity of their circumstances [as slave-gladiators], once contrasted with those of other slaves, precludes any such thought...The argument might be made that Spartacus had once hoped to exploit the general tendency of slaves to resist servitude by flight and to convert the original revolt of gladiators into a wider slave rebellion. But there is no evidence of such aspirations. There can be no reasonable doubt, therefore, that widespread revolt...was not at all the best means by which the gladiators from Capua might hope to convert their act of flight into a state of permanent freedom, for the greater the rebel numbers, the greater the prospect of Roman retaliation in kind...it was the sheer size of the uprising itself that made it impossible to render permanent the freedom the slaves acquired by their acts of revolt. Their only option was to withstand Rome's retaliation for as long as was practically possible by resorting to whatever methods of survival could prove effective...it becomes impossible to view the Spartacan movement as being in any way dominated by abstract or ideological imperatives: freedom from slavery was the intent of the fugitives; the slavery system itself remained unaffected.24

These assessments and my preceding observations are intended to serve readers as a framework for their encounter with the essays in this book. It will be readily apparent that there is no complete consensus between

and among contributors. But this will, we hope, be an incentive to readers to approach the Spartacus of history and film from a fresh perspective. The readers we hope for are all those interested, on the one hand, in ancient history and the classical tradition and, on the other, in cinema and its cultural importance. We also address academic readers in these and related areas of the humanities such as modern history and American studies. All contributions are written in non-specialized English and without academic jargon. We annotate and give references where appropriate so that readers can pursue individual topics further on their own. If we succeed in persuading readers to think anew about Roman history and culture and about historical cinema or to watch *Spartacus* or other historical films with greater understanding or appreciation, our book will have achieved its goal.

As editor of this volume I am indebted first and foremost to my contributors for their willing and enthusiastic participation. They formed a veritable *familia academica Spartacia*. I am grateful to independent scholar Duncan Cooper for agreeing to rework and update his fundamental research on *Spartacus* that had originally appeared in the film journal *Cinéaste* and for providing me with copies of materials from the Kirk Douglas Papers. I am also grateful to the editors of *Cinéaste* for permission to use Duncan Cooper’s publications in their journal as the basis for his contributions here. I owe another debt of gratitude to Thomas Mann at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., for providing me with information about some out-of-the-way sources on American slavery. For illustrations I am once again indebted to William Knight Zewadski, Esq., who allowed me to use a number of film stills from his unique collection. At Blackwell, Al Bertrand, my commissioning editor, deserves thanks for his interest in and generous support of this project from its inception. I also thank Angela Cohen, Annette Abel, and the Blackwell staff for efficiently seeing the book through the production process.
Stanley Kubrick’s and Kirk Douglas’s Spartacus, based on a novel by Howard Fast, purports to tell the true story of a gladiator who, 2,000 years earlier, led a mighty slave uprising which almost succeeded in overthrowing the decaying Roman Republic and its ruthless slave empire. The film represents a breakthrough for left-wing themes in Hollywood cinema after a decade of McCarthyism, not only because of its revolutionary political message but also because blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo received credit for the screenplay under his own name. This broke the blacklist which had been in effect in Hollywood for most of the 1950s. Efforts by right-wing columnist Hedda Hopper and the American Legion to promote a boycott of the film failed when newly elected President John F. Kennedy publicly endorsed it after attending a screening in Washington, D.C. Spartacus went on to become an international box-office hit, winning four Academy Awards and capturing the Golden Globe Award as the Best Dramatic Film of the year.

1. Kirk Douglas vs. Universal Studios: The Battle for Control of Spartacus

Author Howard Fast, however, believed that the film did not do complete justice to his book. In an interview accompanying the Criterion
Collection edition of the restored film, Fast commented that aside from the gladiator fight between Kirk Douglas and Woody Strode nothing in the film could compare in dramatic intensity with the corresponding scenes in the novel. In fact, despite his extensive contributions to the film’s screenplay, for which Fast never received the credit he deserves, an enormous gap exists between the vision of Spartacus which emerges from his novel and the one projected by the film. Using the little that is known about Spartacus as a basis, Fast molded the gladiator rebel into a mythic hero, a messianic figure engaged in an epic revolutionary struggle to overthrow Roman power in order to restore a legendary Golden Age of primitive tribal communism said to have existed in some distant epoch prior to the advent of human exploitation. For Fast, strict adherence to the known facts was less important than the timeless moral truth that was implicit in the legend of Spartacus. By contrast, the film followed a more conservative reading of the facts. It reduced Fast’s gentle Christ-like character to a brawling animal who slowly develops into a likeable tough and then gradually into a sensitive human being and democratic leader. Instead of Fast’s visionary who, through the force of his charismatic personality and military genius, was able to weld an amorphous mass of “slaves, deserters, and riff-raff” into a force which managed to defeat nine of Rome’s best-trained armies and nearly toppled the Republic, the film presents us with a good man and capable leader to whom everything seems to come easy but whose revolt founders in an orgy of torture and death almost before it has begun.1 The escape to freedom of Spartacus’ wife and new-born son from the carnage of 6,000 crucifixions offers the audience only a few rays of hope for the future, especially if we consider that Rome became an almost worldwide empire that lasted for another 500 years.

Because of this difference between book and film, some admirers of the latter believed that cuts imposed by Universal Pictures and the Catholic Church’s Legion of Decency had severely reduced its image of the legendary Spartacus from giant to midget, as it were. These cuts included some gory shots of arms, legs, and heads being cut off in battle, a lengthy scene of a man being drowned in a pot of soup, a shot of blood spurting onto the Roman aristocrat Crassus’ face as he slashes the neck of the dying gladiator Draba, and the subtly bisexual “oysters and snails” seduction scene between Crassus and his slave Antoninus. These cuts,

totaling about five minutes, may also have included at least one battle scene depicting a significant victory for the slave army, whose lack was made evident by numerous lines of dialogue throughout the film which referred directly or indirectly to many such victories. Some lines from Spartacus’ speech to the slaves assembled on a beach – “We’ve traveled a long ways together. We fought many battles, won great victories” – and his lines to his wife Varinia – “But no matter how many times we beat them, they always seem to have another army to send against us. And another.” – are two of the most pointed examples.

Thus when it was announced in September 1990 that Universal Pictures was going to release a fully restored version of the film with five minutes of censored footage reinserted, many fans of the film dared to hope that perhaps now, after thirty years, the authentic legendary Spartacus might finally appear on screen. An advance press handout (“Spartacus Premiere Fact Sheet”) by restoration producers Jim Katz and Robert Harris touted their restoration as “a film with an entirely different tone . . . a completely different film [from] the version we’re used to” and raised further expectations.

Spartacus already had much going for it: magnificent performances by Laurence Olivier, Charles Laughton, and Oscar winner Peter Ustinov, moving scenes from the pen of Trumbo, spectacular camerawork by Oscar winner Russell Metty, excellent editing by Oscar nominee Robert Lawrence, a stirring musical score by Oscar nominee Alex North, and, of course, the direction by Stanley Kubrick. These elements, combined with Fast’s heroic theme of mankind’s age-old quest for freedom, make Spartacus a powerful and moving historical epic. The meticulous restoration by Robert Harris reinforces the film’s impact.

Unfortunately, since Universal had junked almost all the outtakes, trims, and censored scenes of the film in 1975, the restorers could do very little beyond reinserting about five minutes of lost footage to bring Spartacus back to its 197-minute pre-censorship version. Thus the restored version is still roughly the same film that audiences saw during its original run in the early 1960s. A few censored scenes have been restored, notably the “oysters and snails” seduction scene, the two quick shots showing the blood and the terror on Crassus’ face as he stabs Draba, and a longer version of the scene of devastation after the film’s final battle.

On the other hand, several important scenes between Senator Gracchus, the fictionalized leader of the Roman plebeians, and his protégé, the young Julius Caesar, remain missing despite Harris’s dedicated efforts to find them. These deleted scenes defined Gracchus’
political identity through a sometimes funny depiction of his rather corrupt but nevertheless sincere relationship with his constituents, the common citizens of Rome’s fourth ward. They also explained the motivation for Caesar’s crucial defection to Crassus and the patricians late in the film. This reason was Gracchus’ own defection to Spartacus. Reportedly, Laughton, who played Gracchus, was outraged when he realized that several of his scenes were not going to be used in the film and threatened Kirk Douglas with a lawsuit. Laughton was incensed that the studio was keeping his name on the marquee while reducing his role to what might be called a bit-part senator. Nothing came of the lawsuit, but one of these deleted scenes, in which Gracchus explains the secrets of Roman politics to Caesar as they stroll through the back alleys of the slums of Rome, survived in the film until its July, 1960, press screening but was afterwards cut by the studio for reasons of length.

Even more disappointingly, Harris failed to discover any trace of even one lost battle scene that depicted a major slave victory over the Roman legions. Most modern historians would probably agree that during the course of his rebellion Spartacus defeated nine Roman armies ranging from a few thousand raw militia to tens of thousands of veteran legionaries. But viewers today would search in vain for anything like this astounding military accomplishment. Thus both the real and the legendary achievements of Spartacus and his rebels remain as absent from the restored version as they were from the original censored version.

2. The Perils of Breaking the Blacklist

Little if any blame for this travesty of history falls on the shoulders of the film’s director. Then thirty-one years old, Kubrick had very little control over the content of the film, for all final decisions were made by Executive Producer Kirk Douglas, although subject to a veto from Universal. So it is not surprising that, despite the support and assistance he provided the restoration, Kubrick never retracted his public disavowal of *Spartacus*, going so far as to suggest that it be removed from his filmography. “I am disappointed in the film,” he mused rather wistfully: “It had everything but a good story.”

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Evidence indicates that Kubrick himself was only too willing to portray the violence, corruption, and moral degeneracy that inevitably results from a long and bitterly contested class war. Kubrick was responsible for the decision to show the final battle on screen and so turned the film into a full-scale epic. According to James B. Harris, his producer and business partner in the 1950s:

When Stanley read the script, there was no battle scene – it was done in a sort of surrealistic way, with helmets floating down the water with blood stains and battle sounds in the background. Stanley said that you can’t make a spectacle movie and not have a battle scene in it. So he talked them into going to the cheapest area, Spain, where he could get all those extras.3

Battle montages showing a series of slave victories, something that Trumbo had fought for from the beginning and through three versions of the screenplay, also appeared for the first time in revised script pages in late March, 1959, a month after Kubrick replaced Anthony Mann, the film’s original director. Kubrick may have also hoped to temper ex-communist Trumbo’s adulation of the working class and enthusiasm for violent revolution with the irony that revolutions often fail more because of the mistakes, moral weaknesses, and corruption of the revolutionaries themselves than as a result of the supposedly overwhelming strength of their adversaries. Lacking the authority to make final decisions, Kubrick engaged the other members of the film’s executive committee – screenwriter Trumbo, executive producer Douglas, and producer Edward Lewis – in a running, sometimes acrimonious, debate through four versions of the script over what final form the film should take.

Nor is Anthony Mann to be blamed. Well respected for his 1950s films noirs and westerns, Mann supervised, along with Douglas, the four months of pre-production of Spartacus and presumably participated in the complete rewrites of the script that were done in the Fall of 1958. After two weeks of shooting the opening sequence in the mines and some of the early scenes in the gladiator school that are still in the film today, Douglas fired Mann. Mann went on to make such acclaimed epic films as El Cid (1961) and The Fall of the Roman Empire (1964), both of which contain large-scale battle scenes. As producer Lewis remarked in an interview on the Criterion Collection edition of the film: “If it had been up to Tony Mann, we would have used up ten reels for the final battle.”