

Roman History on Screen: *Spartacus* (1960)

Introduction

Rome may be eternal, but the cinematic representation of its history is patchy. By tradition, Rome was founded in 753 BC and its last emperor in the West was Romulus Augustus who was deposed by the German chieftain Odoacer in AD 476. Yet of the 1200 years of Rome's existence, only a few decades are ever represented in film. Within the genres of films about ancient Rome, the depiction of historical narratives is curiously prescribed.

For example, early Rome is largely absent. This omission is striking because stories about the first kings of Rome and the founding of the Roman republic were a standard feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultural representations of Rome. Ever since the Renaissance, artists and dramatists had been drawn to figures such as Lucretia whose suicide after her rape by Tarquin provided the catalyst for the overthrow of Rome's monarchy. Such stories were a staple of the French history-painting tradition. Every artist who wanted to make a name for himself was obliged at some point to turn their attention to stories from Rome's foundation. Authors such as Livy provided compendia of anecdotes that could be translated into exciting, often morally uplifting, images.

Even relatively obscure incidents could be elevated into canonical scenes. The leading French history-painter, Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), for example, depicts a now little-discussed story from Livy concerning the dispute between Rome and the neighbouring town of Alba Longa. According to Livy, in each town there lived a set of triplets (in Rome, the Horatii, and in Alba Longa, the Curiatii) and it was decided that the dispute between the towns should be settled by combat between the two sets of brothers. In the course of combat, two of the Roman brothers are killed before the final Roman triplet can kill all of the Curiatii. Triumphant the last of the Horatii returns to his family. However, upon his return, he discovers his sister weeping for one of the Curiatii, a man to whom she had been betrothed. For such disloyal sentiments, he slays her on the spot. The harshness of the punishment was seemingly endorsed by the Roman people who acquit him for the murder.

This tale of self-sacrifice and duty that transcended familial bonds made the story a suitable subject for David who received a royal commission for the piece. The fame of the image only increased with the outbreak of revolution nearly five years later where its sentiments seemed even

more pertinent. Yet the ideals that the story eulogises, and which make it so suitable for a newly-minted republic that is keen to suborn all competing bonds of affection beneath its revolutionary zeal, are precisely the sentiments which make the story so unsuitable for cinema. Cinema, especially popular cinema, occurs in a post-Romantic age where love justifies all. The idea that we might unquestioningly celebrate the death of two brothers in the service of the State or the murder of a woman for loving the wrong man are ideas that translate uncomfortably into modern cinema. Eulogising the act of putting country before family seems totally divorced from modern sensibilities. The image of the Roman consul Lucius Junius Brutus sentencing his sons to death in 509 BC for plotting to overthrow the republic in order to restore the monarchy may have played well in the eighteenth century (as numerous depictions record), but it is unlikely to provide suitable material for a conventional screenplay.

Other popular stories from the days of the early republic prove equally uncomfortable to translate. For example, the story of Romulus' murder of his twin brother Remus in a dispute over the founding of Rome is a difficult story with which to engage an audience. No matter how the story is set up, it is hard to sympathise with Romulus. Was the murder of Remus worth the establishment of Rome? For the Romans, the answer was certainly yes. Modern audiences have difficulty making the same leap. If nothing else, the echoes of the story of Cain and Abel are too strong. It is hard to empathise with a fratricide.

It is telling that one of the few attempts to film this story, *Duel of the Titans* (1961, UK title: *Romulus and Remus*) avoids the traditional myth-historical narrative and replaces it with a narrative more in line with standard peplum conventions. Remus (Gordon Scott) is transformed into a standard villain, proud, and impious. Here the founding of Rome plays second fiddle to a disputed love interest as Romulus (Steve Reeves) and Remus vie for the affections of Julia (Virna Lisi), daughter of the king of the Sabines. As always in peplum, the plot proves subordinate to spectacle and the display of muscles. Amongst other liberties taken with the traditional storyline was the inclusion of a scene involving a gratuitous but amazing volcanic eruption and the recasting of Rome's enemies, the Sabines as a depraved, degenerate society (trailer: 'Italy, a land possessed by the Sabines, a tribe addicted to strange, orgiastic fertility rites'). Publicity for the film stressed the way that the pseudo-mythical plot pitted the star of *Hercules* (Reeves) against the star of *Tarzan* (Scott). In many ways, it is this semi-mythical bout that the film is really interested in depicting, not an accurate version of the foundation story of Rome.

The inability of popular cinema to play stories from early Rome in any way straight is seemingly confirmed by another film produced in 1961, *Romulus and the Sabines* (also released under the title *Rape of the Sabines*). This sex-comedy starring Roger Moore as Romulus was billed as 'the bawdiest story in history' and retold the story of Romulus' abduction

of Sabine women to provide wives for his followers and so ensure the continuation of his newly founded city. In this version of the tale, the uncomfortable sexual politics of the story are elided in favour of a romantic love story about the attraction between a vestal virgin (played by Mylène Demongeot) and the young dashing Romulus. In keeping with the humorous atmosphere of the film, all responsibility for the actions of the Romans is displaced by making the abduction the result of a competition between Mars and Venus. Moreover, the film goes out of its ways to play down the resistance of the women to their forced abduction. As the trailer for the film exclaimed: 'You couldn't exactly call it stealing. You see, while some young ladies resented it, there were others who delighted in THE RAPE OF THE SABINES.'

The middle and late republican periods fare only a little better. Again the patriotism of the narratives often makes them unsuitable fodder, especially for post-war cinema. The Italian dictator Mussolini's strong personal involvement in the production of the Italian epic, *Scipio Africanus*, ensured that such narratives would always be greeted with suspicion. In a post-colonial age, watching the empire of Rome expand seems positively indecent. Audiences had become too suspicious of empires to be disposed to greet them warmly on screen.

In addition, the complicated politics of the late republic make the period difficult to adapt for cinema. This was a period in which numerous alliances were made and broken, and figures regularly change sides. It is noticeable that the stories that have been most regularly translated to the screen are not new stories lifted from the history books, but stories which have been already assimilated into Western literature through various adaptations. Producers have traditionally seemed happier translating Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* into cinema than commissioning entirely new scripts based on the life of the Roman dictator. The late republic lacks the moral clarity necessary for advancing plotlines. The problem with late republican politics is that everyone seems compromised. Policy all too regularly gives way to pragmatism and even the heroes (or more correctly, especially the heroes) end up with blood on their hands. Only when the action moves away from Rome does it seem possible to render some of this turbulent politics onto celluloid. The numerous films about the life of Cleopatra allow the filmmaker to tell the story of the politics of the late republic at one remove. By focusing on how that politics affects just one individual – the Ptolemaic queen – audiences can gain some idea about the shifting tides of Roman affairs.

It is perhaps telling that the most recent attempt to depict the politics of the period was not a film, but a multi-part television series, HBO's *Rome*. Here the extended format allowed the various intricate political machinations of Caesar, Antony, and Octavian to develop over time so that viewers did not drown in a sea of intrigue. Moreover, by telling the story of the fall of the republic through the eyes of two bit-players, Titus Pullo

and Lucius Vorenus the series provides useful guides for viewers. The audience vicariously learns about republican politics as Titus and Lucius are drawn into affairs of state and matters are explained to them.

The other periods that are poorly served by cinema are the periods of the late empire and the continuation of the Roman empire in the East in Byzantium. A number of factors combine to make these periods less attractive for filmmakers. The unfamiliarity of the historical narratives of the period makes it less easy to win over audiences. In addition, these periods are more visually challenging for audiences familiar with the tropes of classical art. Byzantine emperors do not look at all like emperors of the popular imagination so many of the visual clues which audiences rely upon and enjoy are missing. Finally, the conversion of the Roman empire to Christianity deprives plots of one of their standard narrative features, namely the depiction of the plight of persecuted Christians under Rome. Feature films depicting the persecution of pagans by Christians are a rarity. The most notable exception is *Agora* (2009), which depicted the murder of the pagan female mathematician Hypatia by a group of fanatical Christians in fifth-century AD Alexandria.

Even within stories of Christian persecution, there is a preference for stories set during the reigns of the Julio-Claudian emperors. The large-scale (and better attested) persecutions of Christians under Decius (AD 201-51) and the so-called 'great persecution' under Diocletian and Galerius in AD 303 tend to be ignored. This seems to reflect a general Protestant sensibility on behalf of filmmakers and American audiences who prefer that their Christians have neither priests nor liturgy. Instead, cinematic Christians huddle together in prayer and witness without any of the accoutrements of the established church. The preference for the primitive first generation of Christians stresses the vulnerability of the Christian faith in its infancy. By placing these stories chronologically close to the time of the Resurrection, these narratives link the Roman films with the equally established cinematic genre of biblical epics. They start to occupy the place of sequel or 'spin-off'. Film advertising for Roman epic often stressed the films' similarity with biblical epic and both films appealed to the same market.

Roman historical narratives rarely escape the introduction of large-scale fictional elements into their plots. In many ways, cinema prefers to anchor its narratives around a few established historical facts and then embroider their stories to suit audience tastes and fashions. For example, numerous films are set around the explosion of Pompeii in AD 79, but few incorporate other historical details into their storyline. A number of these films either adapt or were inspired by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*, but none are able to match this novel for its inclusion of historical and archaeological detail.

The need to supplement historical accounts is understandable. There are few accounts from the ancient world that are told with such complete-

ness that they do not need to be supplemented. In particular, few stories contain the necessary romantic elements that make them ideal for popular adaptation. Except perhaps in the case of Cleopatra, romance always needs to be added.

We see this in the case of *Spartacus* (1960). The historical facts surrounding Spartacus' rebellion are reasonably well known and consistent. There are plenty of sources about the life of a gladiator from which it is possible to conjecture his training and life before the rebellion. We are also well informed about Roman politics of the period and the pressures and anxieties that Spartacus' rebellion caused in Rome. However, Spartacus' emotional state is unknown to us. We know that he had a wife, but beyond that almost nothing. In order to avoid the protagonist of the account appearing one-dimensional, an alternative life needs to be invented for him in which we can see his hopes and his dreams. Spartacus, the man, needs to open up to us.

Films that claimed to depict episodes of Roman history constantly needed to balance competing interests. Their storylines need to be compelling. Historical facts provide boundaries within which these stories need to be situated. Conjecture to fill gaps in our sources is inevitable. It seems entirely plausible that Spartacus felt love and hope. But with whom? When? Why? These are questions that remain opaque. It is up to the filmmaker to decide whether the answer to such questions is one that tells a Roman story or a modern one.

Background to case study

The *Spartacus* screenplay owes its origins to a chance encounter in the library of Mill Point prison. In 1950, the imprisoned novelist and playwright, Howard Fast came across a book about Germany after the First World War. Inside he found the story of Rosa Luxemburg, who had been one of the key leaders in the German socialist movement that flourished after the war ended. Luxemburg had named her group of agitators the Spartacists, and her group and its aims appealed to Fast. In particular, he was attracted by Luxemburg's commitment to freedom, a commitment that would ultimately cost Luxemburg her life. It was a sentiment to which Fast could relate.

Fast was a victim of the anti-communist hysteria that swept America at this time. He had been imprisoned for contempt of Congress for failing to answer questions from the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) about his involvement in, and the activities of, the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, an organisation primarily involved in providing food, shelter, and medicine to refugees from the Spanish Civil War who had been driven out by the Fascist leader Franco.

Fast's first thoughts on reading about Luxemburg were to write a novel about her life and activities. However, he felt that it was still too close to

the Holocaust to recount the story of a German Jew imprisoned and later killed for her beliefs. Instead, Fast took his inspiration from the same person who had inspired Luxemburg, the slave leader, Spartacus. This would not be Fast's first novel about slavery. His earlier novel *Freedom Road* (1944) had tackled the topic of slavery in the US.

Fast neither possessed Latin nor was he able to travel to Italy. The main source for his novel was Cyrenus Osborne Ward's *The Ancient Lowly* (1883). This work first appeared in 1883 and a number of subsequent editions were printed in 1888, 1889, and 1907 (the edition used by Fast). The work was a minor classic in Leftist circles. Fast had received his copy as a gift from his instructors after finishing his instruction at the Communist Party training school.

Ward was a passionate advocate of the working classes. His first work was *A Labor Catechism of Political Economy* (1877) and he regularly toured the country advocating, amongst other things, the establishment of a party for the working man and the nationalisation of assets such as the railroad, telegraph, and telephone systems. In *The Ancient Lowly*, Ward attempted the monumental task of describing the lives of the working classes from earliest times until the reign of Constantine. Reflecting contemporary racial theory, the work begins by discussing the differing attitudes towards labour adopted by Aryan and Semitic peoples. It then discusses the Indo-Europeans before charting the story of slavery and its opposition in the Greek and Roman worlds. In such an account, Spartacus plays an important role.

Ward's account of the revolt of Spartacus is distinctive for the way in which it treats gladiators as symptomatic of a much greater malaise in Roman culture, namely the brutal maltreatment of slaves and the working class. Throughout his account he constantly aligns the two groups. For him, the working classes were effectively enslaved through their poverty and so the victories of Spartacus are a victory for all opposed to 'haughty landlords' and 'non-laboring grandees'. 'Spartacus was, in all respects, a working man' (Ward 1889: 223) and his defeat deprived the world of the opportunity for the 'permanent recognition of the honor and merit of human labor' (317). In addition, Ward was keen to see Spartacus' revolt as part of a general trend in Roman politics towards freedom and economic justice for working people. He links therefore Spartacus' revolt with other political events such as the redistribution of land advocated by the Gracchi and the agitation for equality amongst the Italian allies. Ward was particularly interested in the Roman institution of *collegia* which he regarded as ancient trade unions and he argues that the attempted regulation of these guilds fuelled support amongst the working class for Spartacus' revolt. Ward's account saw Spartacus' struggle as intimately linked with popular politics at Rome and a reflection of the spiritual corruption that attends the institution of slavery. Both of these were themes picked up in Fast's novel and their echoes can be seen in the Spartacus screenplay. In

particular, the dual focus in the film on events at Rome and Capua reflects the tenor of Fast's novel.

Fast's novel was published in 1951. Owing to an unofficial blacklist of leftist writers he had been unable to get it published commercially and so was forced to self-publish the novel. The director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover seems to have intervened personally to stymie the publication of Fast's novels. In the environment of fear that operated at the time, no publisher was prepared to risk incurring Hoover's wrath. However, Doubleday, while declining to publish, did let Fast know unofficially that should he publish the novel himself they would buy a large number of copies for their bookstores. This provided enough of an impetus for Fast to risk publishing the novel.

Despite a deliberate policy on the part of mainstream US reviewers to ignore the novel, *Spartacus* proved to be a great word-of-mouth success. Fast went through four printings in the first year of the book's release. Meanwhile in Britain and Ireland, the book was welcomed with a number of positive reviews and orders flooded in. Not everyone was delighted by the novel's success. The *New York Times* berated it for its obvious political bias:

Once it was possible to distinguish the creative writer from the pamphleteer in the works of Howard Fast. Unfortunately for his success in the field of the novel, his steady shift to the left has cast an increasingly hectic fever-flush on each of his recent productions. 'Spartacus,' his twelfth novel, is printed by the author himself. It is a far cry from such notable books as 'The Unvanquished,' [one of Fast's earlier novels] a dreary proof that polemics and fiction cannot mix ... it is obvious from the first page that Mr. Fast has not set out to illumine a poignant episode in ancient history. 'Spartacus,' like so much of his later work, is a tract in the form of a novel. Occasionally (when he is describing the inferno of a slave bivouac in the desert, the torments of a crucified gladiator, the life-and-death struggle in the arena) Mr. Fast's pages take on a brilliance that recalls his earlier work. But the Q. E. D. he proposes simply does not square with the geometry of history. (Heath 1952: 22).

The events leading up to the publication of Fast's novel were turbulent and the same could be said for the events surrounding its screen adaptation. In 1957, the successful actor Kirk Douglas read Fast's novel and saw its potential as a great film and star vehicle for himself. Douglas had already established himself as one of Hollywood's most talented actors. He had been nominated for Oscars for his roles as the boxer 'Midge' Kelly in *Champion* (1949) and the amoral producer Jonathan Shields in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). Douglas enjoyed a reputation for his versatility as an actor with roles ranging from gunslingers (*Along the Great Divide*, 1951; *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, 1957; *Last Train from Gun Hill*, 1959) to jazz musicians (*Young Man with a Horn*, 1950) to the tormented artist Van Gogh (*Lust for Life*, 1956). Nor was Spartacus his first venture into

classical antiquity. Along with Silvia Mangano and Anthony Quinn, Douglas had starred in the 1954 adventure film *Ulysses* based on Homer's *Odyssey*.

What distinguishes *Spartacus* (1960) from these earlier films was Douglas' personal attachment to the project. Other roles had been about displaying his acting talent. In this film Douglas wanted to establish his name as a producer. Early in his career, Douglas had established his own production company, Bryna Productions, named after his mother. Douglas approached Universal to allow Bryna to make *Spartacus*. Universal were initially reluctant, but came around when Douglas was able to convince the well-known stage and film actors Peter Ustinov and Laurence Olivier to take part in the film. It was Douglas' personal investment in this project that saw him take the bold move of employing the talented Dalton Trumbo to adapt the novel for film. Fast had initially been commissioned to produce the script, but in a move that would become common in the production of this film, Douglas had not liked the product ('it was too inactive and talky' – Hanson 2001: 135) nor the speed at which Fast worked and so Fast had been relieved from the duty of producing the script. Fast later sought to have his work acknowledged by a co-writer credit for the screenplay, but his claim was ultimately rejected by the Writers Guild of America.

Like Fast, Trumbo was a victim of the anti-leftist purges that had swept the US. Trumbo was one of the so-called 'Hollywood Ten', a group of film industry professionals who had also refused in 1947 to cooperate with the House Committee on Un-American Activities. All had declined to answer questions about their own membership of the Communist Party and they refused to name others who had been members of the Party or who they suspected of having leftist sympathies. For this, they were blacklisted by Hollywood studios who refused to employ them. Trumbo was jailed for 11 months for contempt of Congress. Even while blacklisted Trumbo continued to write screenplays, although they were always submitted under either pseudonyms or front men. His scripts and treatments for *The Brave One* (1956) and *Roman Holiday* (1953) were given Academy Awards for 'Best Story'. *Spartacus* was the first film for which Trumbo and Fast were publically acknowledged after their respective blacklistings.

Just as there had been production problems over the script, so too were there problems with the direction. Douglas had originally employed Anthony Mann to direct the film. Mann had established his reputation in well-regarded, often psychologically complex, westerns starring James Stewart (e.g. *Winchester '73*, 1950; *The Naked Spur*, 1953; *The Man from Laramie*, 1955). Unfortunately for Mann, the productive relationship that he enjoyed with Stewart did not eventuate with Douglas. Douglas was unhappy with the first few scenes shot by Mann and asked for him to be replaced.

Mann was replaced by the young director, Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick

and Douglas had previously worked together on Kubrick's anti-war film, *Paths of Glory* (1957) in which Douglas played a disillusioned commanding officer who sees his men executed for refusing to undertake an almost certainly suicidal mission. Kubrick would go on to become one of Hollywood's leading directors with films such as *Lolita* (1962), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *The Shining* (1980). In a film system renowned for its collaborative nature, Kubrick was unusual in the degree to which he has controlled his projects. He was always heavily involved in matters of casting, script, and production. This preference for control seems to explain his ambivalent relationship with *Spartacus*. Although initially happy to claim credit for *Spartacus*, Kubrick later in his career disavowed his involvement in the film. Certainly, he exercised less control over its production than he did on a number of other projects. Not only did he inherit a film where Mann had already shot a number of scenes, but Douglas frequently intervened in the production of the film and Kubrick and Douglas clashed on a number of occasions.

Given such a turbulent production history and its origins in the work of a discredited novelist and scriptwriter, there seems to have been every reason to doubt that *Spartacus* was destined for success. Certainly Universal, who were backing the film, had reservations about the project. They were worried about cost overruns and also about public reaction to the film. For this reason, a number of scenes planned in the script were deleted. Many of these were large battle scenes which were dropped either for reasons for expense or because they contained images deemed too gruesome and potentially upsetting to audiences.

Universal had some justification for their concerns. On its release the film was picketed by a number of conservatives. Local branches of the American Legion, the US veterans' association, picketed screenings and its national convention condemned Hollywood's employment of blacklisted writers. Such protests, however, proved to be a minority activity. Amongst the most famous attendees were the Kennedy brothers who were happy to be publicly seen at screenings of the film, and so effectively gave the film an official endorsement. First Attorney-General Robert F. Kennedy publicly attended the film and then a week later his brother President John Kennedy, accompanied by the Under-Secretary of the Navy, also went to see it. Such attendance was particularly marked because normally the President saw films privately at the White House rather than a public theatre. As he left the cinema John Kennedy told reporters that *Spartacus* was a 'fine' film. Many agreed. *Spartacus* was a huge commercial success upon its release. The film made \$60 million dollars worldwide and was nominated for six Academy Awards; winning awards for Best Supporting Actor, Best Art Direction, Best Cinematography, and Best Costume Design.

Importantly, this success led to the end of the Hollywood blacklist. Challenging the blacklist was already in the air. Otto Preminger had

independently announced that he was giving Trumbo a credit for his work on *Exodus* (1960). However, had *Spartacus* failed because of its use of blacklisted figures, then it is hard not to believe that the destruction of the blacklisting system would have been set back considerably. Universal debated for a number of months before allowing Trumbo his screen credit. They were clearly concerned about the opposition that they might face and the effect this would have on audiences. In the end, and together with *Inherit the Wind* (1960) which was released in the same year and featured a script by the blacklisted writer, Nedrick Young, *Spartacus* started a trend that other films were happy to follow. In the few years that followed the release of *Spartacus*, a critical mass of films openly sported blacklist writers and this oppressive period of Hollywood policy was ended.

Plot summary

The film opens in the Roman mines of Libya. Here we encounter the Thracian slave Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) who has been sentenced to death for biting a Roman guardsman who struck him whilst he offered succour to a fellow collapsed slave. However, he is rescued from his fate by Lentulus Batiatus (Peter Ustinov), the owner of a gladiator school who, attracted by Spartacus' strength and spirit, buys him for his school in Capua.

On arriving in Capua, Spartacus is quickly introduced into the life of the gladiator. It is a life both more brutal and more privileged than the one that he had enjoyed until now. Freed from the drudgery of back-breaking work, Spartacus is trained to fight and kill. One of the treats offered to the gladiators are the sexual services of young slave women. It is in this context that Spartacus first meets Varinia (Jean Simmons), a young British slave girl working in the kitchens of the school. Sensing her fear and unwillingness, Spartacus refuses to take advantage of her, especially when he notices Batiatus and his brutal trainer, Marcellus (Charles McGraw) peeping through the grille hoping to catch sight of the two lovers in action.

Matters progress when the wealthy Roman politician and general Marcus Licinius Crassus (Laurence Olivier) and his retinue arrive in Capua. Always eager to please the powerful, Batiatus arranges a display of gladiatorial combat for Crassus and his friends. After prompting from the women in his party, Crassus insists that the fight be 'to the death'. Reluctantly, Batiatus agrees. Two pairs are chosen by the women. The first pair is Crixus (John Ireland) and Gallino and the second is Spartacus and Draba (Woody Strode). While waiting for the combat to begin, Crassus catches sight of Varinia and taking a fancy to her arranges to buy her from Batiatus and have her delivered to his house in Rome. The first fight goes relatively straightforwardly with Crixus dispatching Gallino. However, in the second fight, when Draba manages to pin Spartacus against the wall

of the enclosure, Draba refuses to administer the final blow. Instead, he turns his trident against the watching Romans and charges the viewing box. Sadly, before he can inflict any damage, Draba is struck by a spear from one of the guardsmen and Crassus dispatches him with a slash to the neck.

Following the death of the two gladiators, a sombre mood comes over the gladiatorial school. Spartacus' unhappiness is only increased when he learns from Marcellus that Varinia has been sold. Unable to take the insults of Marcellus any longer, Spartacus drowns Marcellus in a vat of soup. The other gladiators join Spartacus in his rebellion and quickly they overpower the guards. Sensing danger, Batiatus takes Varinia and escapes. Seizing weapons, the gladiators destroy the school and head for the hills.

The scene changes to the Senate of Rome and we learn that Spartacus' rebellious band has been successful not only in evading capture, but also in pillaging the countryside and attracting other slaves to swell their numbers. The Senate resolves at the instigation of the wily politician, Gracchus (Charles Laughton) to send part of the Legion of Rome led by Crassus' protégé, Marcus Glabrus (John Dall) to deal with Spartacus' rebellion.

Unfortunately for the Romans, Spartacus has transformed his band from a drunken rabble into a disciplined fighting force. Energised by the thought of bribing some pirates and sailing away to freedom, Spartacus and his men ravage the countryside freeing slaves and gathering booty with which to pay the pirates. In the course of one of their raids, Spartacus discovers Varinia who had escaped from Batiatus as he fled from Capua. Reunited, their love continues to blossom and eventually Varinia finds out that she is pregnant by Spartacus. Another slave who joins Spartacus' band is the poet and singer, Antoninus (Tony Curtis). Antoninus had previously been a slave of Crassus, but fled his master when Crassus attempted to seduce him.

The first obstacle that Spartacus faces in his bid for freedom is the pursuing Legion of Rome. Underestimating their opponents, the Romans fail to set up adequate defences on their camp and Spartacus takes advantage of this weakness to inflict a humiliating defeat upon them. Almost all of the Romans are killed, the Roman camp is destroyed, and Glabrus is sent back to Rome in disgrace.

Glabrus' defeat allows Gracchus to score points against Crassus and, after a heated meeting of the Senate, Crassus retires from public office to private life. However, Gracchus' ascendancy in political life proves to be short-lived. The ever-increasing success of Spartacus and Gracchus' inability to deal with him causes Rome to become increasingly desperate for a solution to the slave problem. Eventually, the city turns to Crassus and offers him supreme command if he will eliminate Spartacus and his army of slave gladiators.

Crassus' first act is to pay off the pirates so that they will not assist

Spartacus in his plan to flee Italy. As a result, Spartacus finds himself trapped in the heel of Italy. Marching with legions from Rome and joined by the armies of Pompey and Lucullus, Crassus has Spartacus outnumbered. With nowhere to go, Spartacus is forced to engage with the forces of Crassus. The result is an inevitable defeat for Spartacus and his men.

Hoping to make an example of him, Crassus searches for Spartacus amongst the captives. Despite Crassus promising to spare their lives, the slaves refuse to surrender their commander. Instead, each in turn declares 'I'm Spartacus'. As punishment, Crassus orders the crucifixion of all the surviving captives. Their bodies are set up lining the Appian Way, the main highway into Rome.

Whilst inspecting the bodies that litter the battleground, Crassus comes across Varinia still alive and clutching her newly born child. Crassus orders that she be taken to Rome to be a slave in his household. Leaving Varinia, Crassus rides along the row of captive slaves. Among the slaves he encounters he recognises Antoninus and Spartacus. He orders the commander to hold off crucifying these slaves until the very end.

While the slaves march towards Rome, Crassus' enemy Gracchus and Batiatus plot to humiliate Crassus by stealing Varinia from Crassus' house. Sadly, for Gracchus, it is the last plot that he will hatch against Crassus. Crassus, exercising his new powers as dictator, arrests Gracchus and has him brought to the senate chamber. Here he explains that he intends to use his powers to proscribe all his political enemies, starting with Gracchus. It is a vision of the future that Gracchus wishes to have no part in and on returning home he starts to put his affairs in order in preparation for suicide.

As a final act of revenge against Spartacus, Crassus demands that Spartacus and Antoninus fight each other to the death, the winner to be crucified. Neither Antoninus nor Spartacus will allow the other to suffer an excruciating death on the cross and so they fight, each hoping to dispatch the other quickly. In the end, Spartacus manages to kill Antoninus who dies professing his love for Spartacus. Meanwhile, Batiatus rescues Varinia and Gracchus as a final act arranges to smuggle her out of Rome. As she leaves, she catches sight of Spartacus crucified by the gates of Rome. As he dies, she holds up the child so that Spartacus can see that his son has survived and will live the life of a free man.

Key scenes and themes

Between athlete and animal: making sense of gladiators

Few Roman institutions are simultaneously so foreign and so familiar as the gladiator. Almost from the moment cinema first engaged with the depiction of Rome, it was confronted with the issue of how to depict the gladiator. The gladiator is a distinctive and peculiar Roman product and

as such he creates problems for his representation. Ideally, he is best understood in the context of a deep knowledge of Roman religious practice, the Roman law of the person, and the function of the abject (the fascinating 'other') within ideological structures. Without such knowledge, the gladiator is unreadable and one flails around for metaphors trying to capture something of his nature.

The training sequence

The trumpets blast and the screen is filled with a close-up of a giant mannequin armed with a swinging ball-and-chain and a small shield. As the mannequin swings from side to side, blurry figures dance about it, dodging the swing of its lethal-looking weapon. Spartacus manages to duck, but his companion is not so lucky and, after receiving a blow to the head, he crashes to the ground. The scene cuts to another 'training machine' where wooden (later metal) blades swing round a pole as gladiators duck and weave to avoid being sliced. An overview shot of the gladiator school reveals it to be a hive of activity as gladiators run, swing from bars, and engage each other in mock combat. Almost every inch of the training ground is used. The frenetic energy of the scene is picked up by the soundtrack where the woodwind and brass blast away in a breathy staccato imitation of the energetic combatants. Chained together by wooden rods, the gladiators have nowhere to run as they face each other with wooden swords and tiny metal shields.

One witness to all this activity is Varinia, who gazes out at the gladiators from the next-door kitchen. Her look turns to Spartacus who finds himself drawn away from the world of gladiators by the woman who had been offered up to him in the preceding scene.

The pace of the sequence slows as Spartacus finds himself transformed into a live anatomical model for explaining the effect of various blows on the human body. The trainer Marcellus, using brushes dipped in various paint colours, illustrates the range of wounds open to the gladiator. Dabbing Spartacus' throat and breast in red, he shows the spots that lead to an instant kill. Blue marks drawn on Spartacus' thighs and arms mark the places where a blow will cripple an opponent. Finally, the locations to strike for a 'slow kill' are marked in yellow. By the end of the lecture, Spartacus' physique has become a primary-coloured map of the gladiator's art.

The origins of the gladiator lie in the funeral rituals of the Etruscans. Gladiatorial combat was first offered as part of the games commemorating the deceased. The custom was adopted by Rome in the third century BC and quickly became a popular spectacle. We even have one account of a town that refused to allow the burial of a prominent citizen until his heirs promised to provide a gladiatorial show. The attractiveness of gladiatorial games was soon recognised by politicians who were happy to use the pretext of commemorating the death of a relative to stage large popular

games to advance their political causes. The funeral games staged by Julius Caesar for his daughter Julia in 46 BC are usually regarded as a paradigmatic example of such political use of the games, not least because in honouring a woman (who had died eight years before), these games broke new territory and their staging was so obviously designed to increase Caesar's political capital.

Gladiatorial combat also featured as part of the celebration of a number of religious festivals. Initially privately sponsored, they were part of a number of public entertainments, which also included such things as beast hunts, theatrical events, athletic competitions, and public feasts.

As gladiatorial combat rose in popularity so too did the size of the industry that supported it. Gladiatorial schools called *ludi* (sing. *ludus*) emerged for the training of gladiators and there was an ever-increasing demand for men prepared to fight in the arena. Gladiators were drawn from the ranks of enemies defeated in battle and condemned criminals. A man could be condemned to death, for example by crucifixion or being thrown to wild beasts, but he could also be sentenced '*ad ludos*' (to a gladiatorial school). Contemporary moralists often paint gladiators as the worst sort of criminals such as arsonists or murderers. Although later on free men could volunteer to become gladiators, the profession retained its low social position and this was enforced with a number of particular legal sanctions. Under legislation passed by Augustus, for example, freed gladiators were forbidden from ever attaining Roman citizenship. In Roman law, the gladiator belonged to a group of individuals (along with actors and prostitutes) who suffered *infamia* (lit. 'without good reputation') and so were subject to a number of legal disabilities. They were legally classed as untrustworthy, they could neither act as witnesses for legal documents nor hold municipal office.

Yet despite this revulsion, the gladiator also exercised a high degree of fascination for the Roman public. Roman literature, perhaps more in fantasy than reality, regularly portrayed gladiators as the object of sexual desire for Roman women. Graffiti attests to the popularity of individual gladiators and accounts of particularly splendid fights were celebrated by Roman popular culture.

The gladiator represents a paradoxical figure, simultaneously revolting and alluring. He exists at the point where the discourse of Roman law meets Roman religion and popular culture. He is the most recognisable feature of Roman culture, yet the Romans were always keen to stress the foreign origins of the institution. He's elusive, but he leaves traces everywhere. Central, yet almost impossible to grasp.

It is understandable then that cinema has struggled to capture the nature of the Roman gladiator and so has found it useful to employ various contemporary metaphors to help translate this Roman institution into more modern vernacular. One of the more common strategies that has been employed is the drawing of parallels between the gladiator and the

modern sports star. The appeal of such a strategy is obvious. Through recourse to modern notions of fame, the Roman enthusiasm for gladiatorial combat and the cult of personality that seems to have attended gladiators is explained. The similarity in architecture between the modern sporting arena and arenas such as the Flavian amphitheatre (the Coliseum) just seems to underscore the parallel. The fact that the vast majority of gladiatorial combats did not occur in such momentous arenas is quietly forgotten. Of course, such a metaphor can never convey either the religious dimension of gladiatorial combat nor the legal and social disabilities under which the gladiator operated.

The notion of 'the gladiator as athlete' underpins the scene discussed above [see box: 'The training sequence']. With its focus on training and exercise, the gladiatorial school resembles the modern gymnasium, especially considering the focus on specialist training equipment running throughout the scene. Spartacus was released at a time when there was a revolution happening in the nature of exercise. This was a period in which an increasing 'scientific' approach was being applied to physical development. From the turn of the twentieth century, there had been an increasing reliance on specially designed training equipment. Initially, the adoption of such equipment had been sporadic, faddish, and limited to only a few converts. However, by the middle of the century, such equipment had become seen as an essential part of the modern gymnasium. Just as specific weight machines were designed to isolate and target particular muscle groups so too does the fanciful equipment dreamt up for the school of Batiatus target specific gladiatorial actions (jumping, dodging, etc).

The treatment of gladiator as sportsman sits alongside the other dominant metaphor of the gladiator as 'trained beast'. The dehumanising effect of slavery is one of the key themes running through the film. When Spartacus declares that 'we are not animals', he encapsulates the principal criticism of slavery in the film and underscores why slave revolt was inevitable and the institution was doomed. The idea that the ultimate horror of slavery was not the inevitable cruelty that attended it, but the fact that it objectified humans to the point where they become nothing but lumps of meat is constantly reinforced throughout the film. When the slaves first arrive at the *ludus*, Batiatus tells them what regime awaits them: 'A gladiator is like a stallion, you'll be oiled, bathed, taught to use your heads'; a statement that merges the two dominant metaphors of athlete and animal. Like cattle, the gladiators are branded. Throughout the film they are constantly subjected to indignities that bring out their sub-human status. They are locked into cages and, like livestock in a prize competition, their bodies are inspected. Most famously, in the scene prior to the combat before Crassus, the gladiators are inspected by the Roman women. It is this same objectifying frame that allows Marcellus to use Spartacus' body as a living mannequin in his demonstration of the effects of various blows in combat. By reducing the gladiator to just an assem-

blage of muscles, Marcellus perpetuates the notion that gladiators are bodies without dignity.

At the same time, it is worth noting that, for all its professed distress at the horrors of objectification, this film finds such objectification remarkably useful. The inspection scene by the Roman matrons is heavily laced with sexual innuendo and allows the audience to vicariously enjoy the Roman matrons' voyeurism. An inspection by Crassus would not have had the same effect. Similarly, a strong streak of voyeurism flows through Marcellus' delineation of Spartacus' physique. It is an impressive body and the scene allows the audience to enjoy it. Moreover, by providing us with Spartacus' body, the film offers us one meaning of what it means to be a gladiator – namely, the gladiator is nothing but a well-trained arrangement of obedient muscles. Here is *Spartacus'* answer to the question, 'What is a gladiator?'

Spartacus and the quest for freedom

Spartacus is simultaneously gladiator and slave, and it is this dual identity that allows him to participate in two distinct cinematic discourses about Rome. The first, as we have seen above, is his role in the perpetuation of Rome as the centre of spectacle and entertainment. The second is the notion of Rome as the paradigm of the oppressive, totalitarian state. This curious tension between the Rome that we love to see and the Rome that we fear to live under plays out in a number of ways in the film.

The story of Spartacus is the story of one man's struggle to be free. In this sense, the film seeks to make a unique historical circumstance a universal one. Just as the legal and social framework that created the gladiator was unique to Rome so too was its institution of slavery. The capacities, lifestyle, and treatment of Roman slaves differed markedly, not only from the slaves of ancient Greece and Egypt, but also the slaves of the Caribbean and the American South. Yet, as the voice-over that begins the film makes clear, the slavery of Rome is just one chapter in the history of this 'disease'.

In expressing its disgust for the institution of Roman slavery, *Spartacus* was following in well-trodden territory. Anxiety about slavery was a common theme in epic films set in Rome. *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954) all identify slavery as Rome's greatest flaw. Moreover, in making Spartacus the vehicle for the discussion of issues relating to slavery and its legacy, the film again ventures onto familiar ground. As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, parallels were drawn between Spartacus' struggle against Rome and the struggle for the emancipation of slaves in the United States. For example, Robert Montgomery Bird's play about Spartacus, *The Gladiator* (1831), although intended as a rousing piece to stir up patriotism in the newly-

The arrest of Gracchus

Caesar strides into the atrium of Gracchus' house. At his back are two fully armed guards. He begs the pardon of Gracchus for the intrusion. Gracchus initially warmly welcomes him, but his face changes when he sees the guards. The political pupil has come to teach his master a lesson in politics. Caesar comes with orders to bring Gracchus to the senate. 'What I do, I do not for myself, but for Rome', he apologises to the old man. 'Poor helpless Rome', Gracchus replies.

The scene shifts to the senate house. Previously, it has been a scene of light and debate. Now it is dark and covered in shadow. The face of Crassus fills the screen. He barks at Gracchus, berating him for his populist politics. 'Did you think 500 years of Rome could so easily be handed over to the mob?', he asks. He then recounts the cruel sentence of crucifixion that he has handed out to the rebellious slaves. The same fate, he warns Gracchus, awaits any who 'falter one instant in loyalty to the new order of affairs'. Crassus continues, 'The enemies of the State are known. Arrests are in progress, the prisons begin to fill. In every city and province, lists of the disloyal have been compiled. Tomorrow they will learn the cost of their terrible folly, their treason.'

Gracchus then learns that although his name appears first on the list of traitors he is to be spared punishment and will instead be sent to a luxurious exile in the country. In return, Crassus demands that Gracchus become a tool of the new order. He intends to use Gracchus' influence with his followers to ensure their compliance with Crassus' new regime. 'You will persuade them to accept destiny and order and to trust the Gods', he says before dismissing the senator who shuffles from the senate house traumatised by his interview.

minted American republic, was often interpreted as making a plea on behalf of the contemporary emancipation movement.

Spartacus is a man 'dreaming the death of slavery two thousand years before it would finally die'. The film makes the abolition of slavery in the US the final step in a process begun many years earlier in the fields of Capua. Yet, the film makes greater claims than this. By dating the death of slavery to 'two thousand years' after the time of Spartacus, the film ensures that the contemporary civil rights movements of the 1960s are included as part of the eradication process. Slavery didn't die when Lincoln ordered the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 or the Thirteenth Amendment to the US constitution was passed. No, *Spartacus* sees slavery disappearing from the earth only with the end of segregation and the granting of full equality. *Spartacus* not only preached this political message, it also enacted it. In a still largely segregated and discriminatory Hollywood, one of the key supporting roles was given to the African American actor, Woody Strode.

Strode's performance as Draba, the African gladiator who refuses to take Spartacus' life in the arena, stands in contrast to the usual depiction

of Africans and African Americans at the time. Instead of a depiction of a brutal savage or a comic happy-go-lucky slave in the American South, Strode invests his character with a reserve and dignity that deliberately contrasts with almost every character in the arena. His bravery shows up the cowardice of Batiatus, his silent modesty stands as an accusation against the garrulous depravity of the Roman women, and his death at the hands of Crassus introduces the audience to the Roman's cruelty. Such a depiction fitted well with the trajectory of Strode's career. A star athlete, he had continually been in the vanguard of breaking down barriers of segregation in athletics and football. His acting career had similarly been path-breaking. Initially cast to play stereotypical roles such as the Ethiopian king in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and an African native in *Jungle Man-Eaters* (1954) and the TV-series *Jungle Jim* (1955), his career would take-off with more substantial roles after he played the title role in *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), a film that broke new ground in telling the story of a black man falsely accused of the murder and rape of a white girl. Indeed, *Spartacus* was not the first time that Strode had acted in a Roman epic. One of his earliest roles had been as the lion in *Androcles and the Lion* (1952). In addition, he had an uncredited role as a gladiator in *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954). In making the transition from mute extra to the noble catalyst for Spartacus' rebellion, we see the political message of the film enacted. Here was a film that refused to put black identity in the corner, but instead chose to speak out to contemporary black concerns through the parable of Roman slavery.

Yet Spartacus' story is broader than just the story of emancipation, as this scene makes clear [see box: 'The arrest of Gracchus'], it is also a story about resistance to totalitarian force. Slavery comes in many forms. Sometimes it is dependent on race, sometimes on status at birth, and sometimes on political persuasion.

The extent to which *Spartacus* offers political critique is the subject of debate. Right-wing critics opposed to the film were not shy of attributing a distinct leftist agenda to it. They played up the political affiliations of both Fast and Trumbo and argued that the film was a work of propaganda, one that smuggled its communist message under the cover of Roman togas and stories of slave rebellions. It is tempting to dismiss such claims as the alarmist fantasies of a vocal pressure group. All the correspondence relating to the film by Douglas and Trumbo never indicate anything more subversive than a desire to make a commercially and critically successful film. The film's box-office success would seem to confirm that their desire for a film with mainstream appeal worked. A comparison of the film script with Fast's novel shows that what left-wing politics existed in the story largely failed to translate into the cinematic version.

Yet if *Spartacus* doesn't advocate a specific political position that doesn't mean that it completely avoids criticism of contemporary and recent political situations. We feel this most strongly in the interchange

between Crassus and Gracchus. Conducted in Rome's senate house, it is hard not to hear the echoes of the HUAC examinations here. The scene demonstrates how all too easily the language of patriotism slips into a language of repression and vindictive reprisal. It provides a perfect counterpoint to the great cinematic moment of the film, the famous 'I am Spartacus' sequence. The slaves' refusal to name Spartacus, thus condemning themselves to death, resonated all too strongly with a Hollywood still bearing the scars of the infamous anti-Communist purges and blacklists of the 1950s.

Pushing the social limits

One of the criticisms made against Hollywood's Roman epics is that they tend to reinforce conservative social agendas. Certainly this is largely the case when it comes to gender roles, and it would be hard to argue that *Spartacus* does much to depart from this tradition in its representation of women. Yet, in other respects, *Spartacus* embraces a much more radical and progressive politics. In particular, and almost uniquely for epic film, it confronts issues relating to sexuality, most famously in its 'Oysters and snails' scene [see box].

This scene never appeared in the final general-release version of the film. Universal Pictures, the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency, and the censors demanded a number of substantial alterations to the film to reduce the graphic nature of its violence and immorality. The 'oysters and snails' scene was the victim of one such round of cuts. The scene was just a little too ahead of its time. It was not until the following year that the film Production Code was altered to allow depictions of homosexuality that treated the topic with 'care, discretion, and restraint'. Even then, the first films to treat the topic tended to be British imports and the homosexuality that they depicted was normally the cause of suicide and despair rather than pleasure or fulfilment. The 'oysters and snails' scene was only restored in 1990 when Universal Pictures announced that they were going to release an anniversary version of the film. By that stage, Olivier was dead. His voice was dubbed by Anthony Hopkins.

The absence of representations of homosexuality is one of the more noticeable omissions in films set in the ancient world. The omission is all the more striking because the supposed liberalism of ancient sexuality was one of the major draws for filmmakers. Scantly-clad dancing girls and predatory empresses reclining on couches are all standard features of the repertoire. An ancient world full of sexual promise and adventure has been regularly displayed for the voyeuristic enjoyment of cinema audiences. Film advertising regularly promoted the level of sexual excitement that viewers could expect in these displays of 'depraved, pagan Rome'. Yet it was only ever heterosexual sex that was on offer. Displays of imperial effeminacy on the part of decadent emperors may have gestured in the direction of the homoerotic, but the issue of male sexual desire for other

'Oysters and snails'

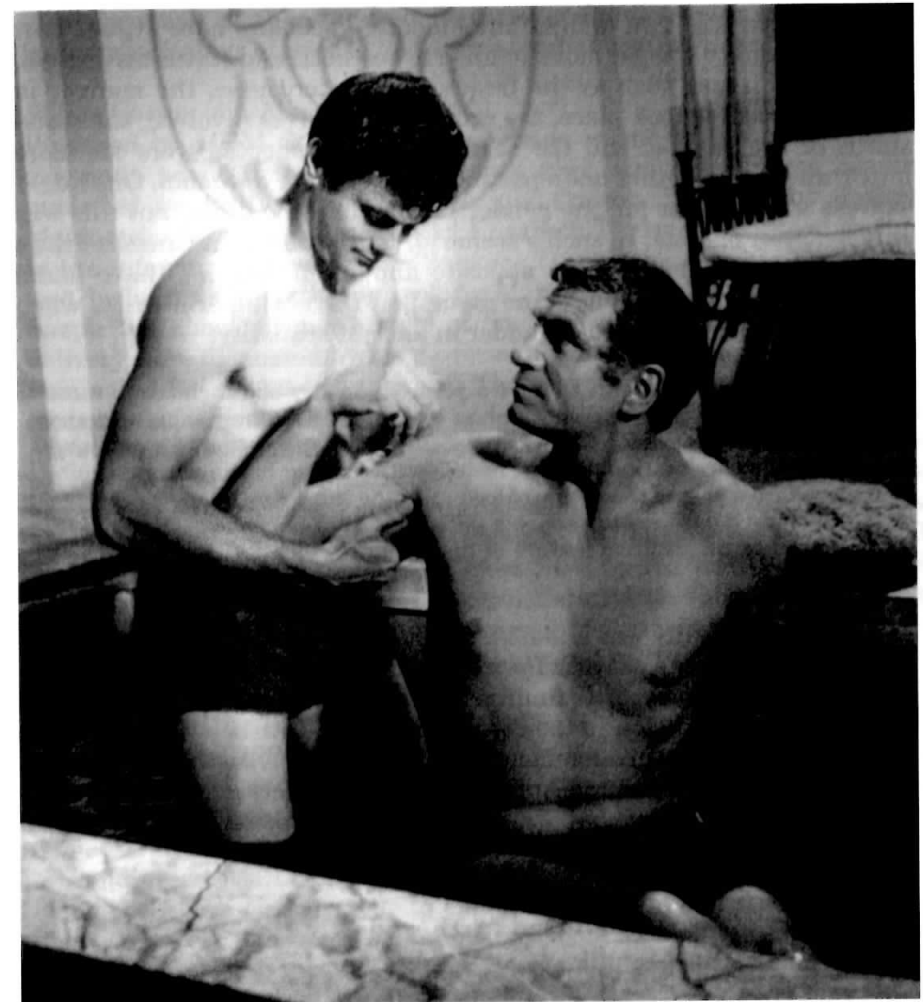
Through a sheer curtain, we see Crassus bathing in a small pool, the size of a large bathtub [Fig. 9]. 'Fetch a stool, Antoninus', he calls as Antoninus enters the room from the left. Antoninus then joins his master in the pool and begins to massage Crassus' shoulders with scented oil. The ethereal sounds of Eastern strings and cymbals gives the scene an exotic soundscape. 'Do you steal, Antoninus?', Crassus asks. 'No, master', Antoninus replies. Crassus then asks him whether he has ever lied or dishonoured the gods. To both questions, Antoninus replies in the negatives. Crassus continues his Socratic questioning of the slave. Does he refrain from vice out of respect for the moral virtues? 'Yes', replies Antoninus.

Crassus then seems to change tack and asks whether Antoninus ever eats oysters and snails. Antoninus expresses a preference for the former and a dislike for the latter. At this point, Crassus returns to the question of morality and asks whether such preferences are moral issues or issues of taste. When Antoninus expresses the opinion that dietary choices are not governed by codes of morality, Crassus then uses this admission to express the view that matters of taste are different from appetite and so different from moral issues. Uncertain (or perhaps all too certain) about where this line of reasoning is heading, Antoninus is forced to admit that 'it could be argued so, master'. As Antoninus strokes Crassus' arms, the Roman looks up into the face of his attractive slave. He then calls for his robe and while Antoninus dresses him, he confides that he is a person whose 'taste includes both snails and oysters'.

men was never directly addressed. Charles Laughton as Nero in *Sign of the Cross* (1932), a pre-Code film, has a very attractive, scantily clad boy as his attendant, but the precise relationship between the emperor and his slave is left entirely unspoken.

It was not that ancient homosexuality was an unknown topic. From the fin-de-siècle onwards, Greek homosexuality was an 'open secret'. Numerous early homosexual activists at the beginning of the twentieth century had advocated homosexual rights based on the acceptance that Greece had tolerated male-to-male love. Even those opposed to homosexual emancipation were fully cognisant of its prevalence in the ancient world. Indeed, it was one of the sources of anxiety about the promotion of the ancient world in the modern era. Popular novelists such as Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1987) in her international bestseller, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951, translated as *Memoirs of Hadrian* for UK publication in 1955 and US release in 1957) and Mary Renault (1905-1983) in a large number of her works repeatedly discussed ancient Greek and Roman homosexuality. Indeed, these authors expected their representations of homosexuality to resonate as contemporary desires. For example, even though Renault sets her novel *The Charioteer* (1953, released in the US in 1959) in the period of the Second World War, the homosexuality of the central characters is

repeatedly discussed through allusions to the Greeks, indeed the title of the work itself is a reference to the *Phaedrus*, Plato's dialogue devoted to the topic of male love. For these novelists, it was impossible to discuss the ancient world without making reference to homosexuality; an imperative not shared by filmmakers. The most explicit representation of ancient homosexuality in Renault's work came in her trilogy of novels about the life of Alexander the Great, *Fire from Heaven* (1969), *The Persian Boy* (1972), and *Funeral Games* (1981). This latter collection of novels subsequently proved very influential on Oliver Stone as he prepared his film, *Alexander* (2004). Alexander's relationship with his companion Hephaes-



9. A scene too scandalous to show. Crassus and Antoninus, *Spartacus* (1960).

tion in the film was a direct result of Renault's popularising of Alexander's bisexuality.

Stone's depiction of Alexander's homosexuality created a scandal when the film was released. Yet in many ways, the scene from *Spartacus* is even more trailblazing. Not only was it produced (although not shown) so much earlier, but the scene treats the topic of ancient homosexuality with more subtlety and sophistication than Stone's depiction. In many ways, the scene in *Spartacus* presages contemporary thinking about male homosexuality. In the last decade, scholarship on classical homosexuality has moved away from associating male homosexual practice with any notions of fixed orientation. Rather than seeing the gender of one's sexual partner as a characteristic that defines one's identity, scholars have argued that ancient sexuality was far more attuned to aesthetic and status distinction. As a result issues such as the frequency of intercourse, the manner in which intercourse took place, the economic resources involved, the social status of the parties, and the sexual positions adopted were far more important than whether one's partner was a man or a woman. One might express a preference for one gender rather than the other, but this was only a matter of taste. In such a scenario, the parallel that Crassus draws with food seems particularly apposite and recent scholars have found themselves reaching for the same metaphor. David Halperin writes when dismissing the importance of gender in ancient sexuality:

It would never occur to us to refer a person's dietary object-choice to some innate, characterological disposition or to see in his strongly expressed and unvarying preference for white meat of chicken the symptom of a profound psychological orientation, leading us to identify him or her in contexts quite removed from that of the eating of food ... In the same way, it never occurred to pre-modern cultures to ascribe a person's sexual tastes to some positive, structural or constitutive feature of his or her personality (Halperin 1990: 26-7).

In short, sex really was a matter of oysters or snails.

It would have been easy for *Spartacus* to fall into the trap of perpetuating a rigid dichotomy of sexuality. The woman-loving Gracchus would have been a suitable foil to the cold, homosexual Crassus. Yet *Spartacus* avoids such obvious arrangements. In making Crassus oscillate in his desires between Varinia and Antoninus, the film offers a level of complexity and sophistication that does justice to the more complex sexual protocols of the ancient world.

Suggested further viewing

Spartacus (Italian title: *Spartaco* or *Il gladiatore della Tracia*, dir. Vidali, 1913)

This early cinematic treatment of the Spartacus story is based on Raffaello

Giovagnoli's historical novel *Spartaco* (1874). Giovagnoli had fought with Giuseppe Garibaldi in the Italian Wars of Independence that led to the unification of Italy in the nineteenth century and his novel reflects his nationalist politics. The same politics was shared by the director of the film, Giovanni Enrico Vidali who used the film to send a powerful political message. Although the film in its initial stages follows the historical narrative of the Spartacus revolts, the final stages of the film depart radically from the historical facts. In this film, Spartacus defeats Crassus and is welcomed into Rome where after meeting some opposition he manages to unite all the disparate factions in Roman politics and establish a new reign of peace in the land. Shot in the Italian countryside, the film displays many of the standard features of Roman epics of the period including displays of muscle and arena combat against lions.

Julius Caesar (dir. Mankiewicz, 1953)

Produced by MGM Studios, *Julius Caesar* is one of the most famous cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's play, which itself was heavily modelled on Plutarch's *Life of Julius Caesar*. Directed by Joseph Mankiewicz, who would later direct Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in the infamous production of *Cleopatra* (1963), the film has an all-star cast, including a breakthrough role for Marlon Brando who played Antony. Suspicions about Brando's style of 'method' acting and his mumbling delivery were dismissed by his performance in this role for which he was nominated for an Academy Award. The cast was particularly noticeable for its associations with the stage and Mankiewicz's cinematic technique played to their strengths. The intense focus throughout the film on the play of emotions across characters' faces reflects his confidence in his actors' talents. Prominent actors included John Gielgud (Cassius), James Mason (Brutus) and Deborah Kerr (Portia). The film received great critical acclaim upon its release and was even cited by the Italian Ministry of Education in Rome as being of 'exceptional artistic values and of great cultural interest'. It was subsequently widely distributed within the Italian school system on account of its quality and historical subject matter.

Spartacus and the Ten Gladiators (Italian title: *Gli invincibili dieci gladiatori*, dir. Nostro, 1964)

Spartacus exists not just as an historical figure, but also as the embodiment of a set of virtues. Situated firmly within the peplum genre, this film demonstrates the way in which Spartacus, like Hercules, could be used as a branding device. Like *Spartacus* (1960), this film is also interested in using the figure of Spartacus to explore repression and the struggle for liberty. However, in this case, the historical circumstances are jettisoned in favour of a romp through the standard peplum clichés of endless fight scenes and saccharine love stories. The film tells a loose version of the Spartacus story from the perspective of Rocco (the bodybuilder Dan

Classics on Screen

Vadis), the leader of a band of ten gladiators who are sent out by Spartacus' former owner, Senator Varro, to recapture the escaped slave. They themselves are defeated and captured by Spartacus and in the process of fighting him are won over to his cause. Returning to Varro without Spartacus, the gladiators are imprisoned for their failure. Escaping through a combination of brute strength and the help of Varro's beautiful daughter Lydia, and joining up with Spartacus they lead a rebellion of slaves against Varro's repressive rule.

Notes

- 145-83 ('White Men's Muscles'); Lagny (1992); Lucanio (1994): esp. 12-56; Frayling (2004).
- Hit and run cycles: Frayling (2004): 163-4
- Financing of peplum films and production arrangements: Wagstaff (1995) and (1998). cf. 'Nine British Films Earn £2,400,000', *The Times* (27/4/1961): 18.
- Contemporary reaction to *Hercules*' 1959 US release: Nason (1959)
- Later reaction to peplum: Bosley Crowther, 'Spears and sandals: flood of cheap costume films causes dismay', *New York Times* (12/3/1961): X1; Richard Nason, "'Hercules" starts flood of movies', *New York Times* (24/10/1959): 13; Charlton Heston, 'The epic fever', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (17/12/1961); Bosley Crowther, 'Sweet life in Italy', *New York Times* (8/5/1960): X1; Thomas Meehan, 'It's not good taste, not bad taste – it's camp', *New York Times* (21/3/1965).
- Times* review: 'Review: Thriller and social study: an awkward film mixture', *The Times* (8/5/1959): 6.
- Hercules* and the Olympics: 'New movie "Hercules" shows Greek Olympics', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (28/6/1959): J12.
- Hercules Unchained* (1960): 'Most successful film in Britain', *The Times* (8/12/1960): 18; Howard Thompson, "'Hercules Unchained" heads twin bill', *New York Times* (14/7/1960): 23.
- Joseph E. Levine: N. Robertson, 'Joseph E. Levine, a towering figure in movie making is dead', *New York Times* (1/8/1987); Douglas Gomery (2000) 'Levine, Joseph E', *International Dictionary of Film and Filmmakers*.
- On Levine's marketing campaign: Hedda Hopper, 'Looking at Hollywood', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (11/3/1959): B5 and (13/7/1959): B6. Promotion of peplum films: Chapman (2002).
- Hercules* and Macy's advertisement: *New York Times* (22/7/1959): 7.
- Cicero: *De Officiis* 3.5.25.
- Staging Greece: Nisbet (2006): esp. 7-9. Importance of landscape: García (2008).
- Fascism and antiquity: Fleming (2007). Fascism in film: Landy (1986).
- Farnese Heracles: Haskell and Penny (1981); Beard and Henderson (2001): 199-202; Beard (1996).
- On demand for bodybuilders after *Hercules*: 'Nice work if you can get it', *Chicago Daily Tribune* (23/7/1961): C16.
- On the decline of *Hercules* in the twentieth century: Galinsky (1972).
- Bodybuilding: Dutton (1995): 119-29; Webster (1979): 29-35.
- Classics and bodybuilding: Wyke (1997b).
- On peplum and the crisis of masculinity: Kasson (2001); Faludi (1999).
- Women in *Hercules* advertising: 'Display advertisement', *New York Times* (22/7/1959): 7.
- Lemnian women: Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 1.610-39. Amazons: Dowden (1997); Henderson (1994); von Bothmer (1957); Blondell (2005).
- Hercules Conquers Atlantis*: Shahabudin (2009).

4. Roman History on Screen: *Spartacus* (1960)

- Spartacus* (1960): Wyke (1997a): 34-72; Solomon (2001a): 50-8; Winkler (2007b); Theodorakopoulos (2010): 51-76.
- The rape of Lucretia: Camino (1995); Donaldson (1982).
- Horatii: Livy, *History of Rome* 1.24-6. David, *Oath of the Horatii*: Crow (1985): esp. 211-20, 235-41; Lee (1999): 81-95; Wind (1941-42).

- Lictors Bringing Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (1789): Crow (1985): 247-54, (1995): 102-11; Lee (1999): 119-27; Herbert (1972); Korshak (1987): 113-15.
- Romulus and Remus: For an introduction to the mythic background, see Wiseman (1995). *Duel of the Titans*: Solomon (2001a): 129-30 (oddly sees the film as faithful to the sources).
- HBO's *Rome*: Cyrino (2008).
- Historical Spartacus: A selection of the main historical sources for Spartacus are translated in Winkler (2007b): 234-47.
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