CHAPTER NINE

The Holy Cause of Freedom: American Ideals in *Spartacus*

Martin M. Winkler

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." With these words President Abraham Lincoln began the Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863. In the course of his short speech he referred to the "great task remaining before us": the abolition of slavery and "a new birth of freedom."[1] In the spirit of Lincoln, the title of a modern history of the American Civil War is *Battle Cry of Freedom*.[2]

1 On the Gettysburg Address and its echoes of classical antiquity cf. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992; rpt. 1993). Lincoln's text is at Wills, 263. On Lincoln cf. Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; rpt. 1995). On the importance of the Civil War for the development of American democracy and the abolition of slavery see now especially Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005).

2 James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; rpt. 2003). The title of a recent study by a professor of American religious history indicates that the Americans have a primarily moral, even sacred, perspective on this war: Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006). For some critical comments on this book see the review essay by McPherson, "Was It a Just War?" *The New York Review of Books* (March 23, 2006), 16 and 18–19.

Freedom and *liberty* are quintessential terms for the way Americans have understood themselves and their history since the days of the American Revolution. Patrick Henry proclaimed "Give me liberty or give me death," and Thomas Jefferson spoke of "the holy cause of freedom."[3] This is in spite of the fact that those who declared all men to be created equal could themselves own slaves, a circumstance that elicited a rather sharp comment from Samuel Johnson: "how is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"[4] Johnson put his finger on the sorest spot in American history.

The Americans patterned their new republic on that of ancient Rome.[5] The Roman republic has long been the best-known slave-holding society of the pre-modern West, but it was also the culture generally revered as a model for new political and social developments during the Enlightenment and later. With Rome as their model, Americans could own slaves and still regard themselves as preservers and defenders of liberty at home and abroad.[6] After increasingly heated debates over

3 Jefferson's words are in his "Response to Address of Welcome by the Citizens of Albemarle" in Virginia (February 12, 1790); quoted from Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America / Viking, 1984), 491.

4 Quoted from Samuel Johnson, "Taxation No Tyranny; an Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress" (1775), in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 10: *Political Writings*, ed. Donald J. Greene (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 411–455; quotation at 454. Cf. Greene's comment on this at 454 note 9. On the wider context see now Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (2005; rpt. New York: Ecco, 2006), and Gary B. Nash, *The Forgotten Fifth: African Americans in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

5 On this subject see, e.g., Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984); Susan Ford Wiltshire, *Greece, Rome, and the Bill of Rights* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); and Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994). All contain further references.

6 Cf. Eugene N. Genovese, *The Slaveholders' Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992; rpt. 1995), 5: "The proslavery theorists never tired of proclaiming that the greatness of ancient Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Rome had been based on slavery, and the reading of ancient history and literature seemed to confirm the proclamation." Cf. also *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South*, ed. Eric L. McKitrick (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963); *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830–1860*, ed. Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981; rpt. 1985); Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview*

slavery, the secession of thirteen slave-owning states from the Union and after more than a year and a half of Civil War. American slaves officially became free with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. In the twentieth century, Americans defended freedom abroad in both world wars and defeated Fascism and Nazism. When a new totalitarian enemy, Soviet Communism, began to affect Americans, the resulting Cold War had its domestic corollary in McCarthyism, which extended even to Hollywood.[7]

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 249–304 (chapter entitled "In the Shadow of Antiquity"). See also Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 95–98 and 241 (slavery as an "antimodel"). For a comparison of Roman and American slave systems see, e.g., Barry A. Crouch, "'Booty Capitalism' and Capitalism's Booty: Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome and the American South," *Slavery and Abolition* 6 (1985), 3–24. On the legal background see especially Alan Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) and *Slave Law in the Americas* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989; rpt. 1990), and the following essays in *Slavery and the Law*, ed. Paul Finkelman (Madison: Madison House, 1997): Alan Watson, "Seventeenth-Century Jurists, Roman Law, and Slavery" (367–377); Jonathan A. Bush, "The British Constitution and the Creation of American Slavery" (379–418); Alan Watson, "Thinking Property at Rome" (419–435); and Jacob I. Corré, "Thinking Property at Memphis: An Application of Watson" (436–451). In general cf. also David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27–47 and 336–340 (notes; chapter entitled "The Ancient Foundations of Modern Slavery"). Cf. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; rpt. 2006).

7 For recent studies of McCarthyism see *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare: A Documentary History*, ed. Albert Fried (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (1998; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Ellen Schrecker, 2nd edn. (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2002); and Ted Morgan, *Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2003; rpt. 2004). Tom Wicker, *Shooting Star: The Brief Arc of Joe McCarthy* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006). Cf. also Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2nd edn. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For various perspectives on McCarthyism in Hollywood see Stefan Kanfer, *A Journal of the Plague Years* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); Lillian Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976; rpt. 2000); Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (1980; rpt. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (1980; rpt. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Nancy Lynn Schwartz and Sheila Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' War* (1982; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983); Brian Neve, "HUAC, the Blacklist, and the Decline of Social Cinema," in Peter Lev, *Transforming the Screen 1950–1959* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 65–86 and 319–322 (notes); and Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003; rpt. 2005).

The most conspicuous kind of film that Hollywood had begun making after World War II was historical epics, chiefly in reaction to the rise of television. These films began to thrive when several technical innovations were introduced to make the cinema screen more attractive than the tiny black-and-white screen in American living rooms. The cinema is the best mass medium to express political, cultural, and social issues, and historical films reflect the period of their making at least as much as they deal with the past.[8] Concerning American cinema set in antiquity, a scholar has pointed out:

> The favorite epic story . . . concerns a persecuted group secretly supported by God: Jews, Christians, and occasionally slaves. Their oppressors are Egyptians, Romans, patricians. It is the colonies against the mean mother country . . . I am not attributing sneaky allegorical motives to the makers of these movies. I am just saying that there aren't all that many models for a big confrontation between a powerful (but doomed) tyrant and a virtuous victim whose virtue, in the end, will reap rich historical rewards. This is the encounter that takes place again and again in epics, and it seems natural that American moviemakers should, no doubt unconsciously, fall back on a popular version of their country's birth.[9]

Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* conforms to this general pattern. I will here examine *Spartacus* in regard to the specifically American qualities with which the filmmakers endowed their titular hero and his story. In the popular American imagination, the history of Rome is inextricably linked to the early history of Christianity. So a religious component is present even in a film like *Spartacus* that is set decades before the birth of Jesus. In its presentation of Spartacus as a messianic protagonist, the film expresses a dual emphasis on freedom and religion that is more important than any of the political analogies that it contains and more

8 On cinema as society's seismograph cf. my comments in the "Introduction" to *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–22, at 8 note 7. J. Hoberman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New York and London: The Free Press, 2003; rpt. 2005), is a detailed study along such lines and refers to *Spartacus* throughout.

9 Michael Wood, *America in the Movies; or, "Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind"* (1975; rpt. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 184. Before *Spartacus*, the Paris of Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* (1956) had urged his beloved to escape with him as the only way to end her status as a virtual slave in Sparta and obtain her liberty. The trend continues in recent cinema: Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur* (2004), despite its name more of a Roman than a medieval film, justifies its simplistic tale of endless gore with the hero's quest for freedom.

revealing about how Americans see themselves.[10] The film's prologue alerts viewers to the connections between freedom and religion. I approach *Spartacus* from the point of view expressed in this prologue, here placed in the context of comparable prologues heard in 1950s American films about Rome.

1. Prologues

The first film set in ancient Rome that was produced in Hollywood after 1945 is Mervyn LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* (1951). Its prologue reveals the way audiences are to interpret the story of Nero and the early Christians and provides the model for other films made in the 1950s. Over images of a legion returning to Rome victorious, with booty and slaves, the omniscient narrator tells us the correct attitude with which to follow the story. Looking back on the past with a modern consciousness, he provides a bridge between contemporary and ancient times. I quote only those of the narrator's words that express the film's general theme of tyranny, liberty, and religion, omitting those others that reflect more topical overtones.[11] The prologue of *Quo Vadis* is a blueprint for the narrative perspective of *Spartacus* almost ten years later:

> Imperial Rome is the center of the empire, an undisputed master of the world. But with this power inevitably comes corruption . . . Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to bondage. High and low alike become Roman slaves, Roman hostages. There is no escape from the whip and the sword. That any force on earth can shake the foundations of this pyramid of power and corruption, of human misery and slavery,

10 I refer readers interested in political interpretations of *Spartacus* to John Baxter, *Stanley Kubrick: A Biography* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1997), 133–134; Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 56–72, and Alison Futrell, "Seeing Red: Spartacus as Domestic Economist," in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001; rpt. 2005), 77–118, at 97–111. Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, 1–36 and 410–413 (notes), examines political, cultural, and cinematic contexts of *Spartacus* in a chapter entitled "Remaking History, A.D. 1960." Hoberman discusses the similarities of *Spartacus* to two other large-scale epics of the same year, John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* and John Wayne's *The Alamo*. In both, an outnumbered group of plucky heroes fight for the righteous cause of freedom against oppressors. In the one, half of the heroes die; in the other, all.

11 I examine these in "The Roman Empire in American Cinema After 1945," *The Classical Journal*, 93 (1998), 167–196, at 172–184; slightly revised in *Imperial Projections*, 77–118, at 55–65.

> seems inconceivable. But thirty years before this day a miracle occurred. On a Roman cross in Judaea, a man died to make men free, to spread the gospel of love and redemption. Soon that humble cross is destined to replace the proud eagles that now top the victorious Roman standards. This is the story of that immortal conflict.

The narrator then refers to "the Antichrist known to history as the Emperor Nero," thereby clinching the viewers' required attitude. To those in the audience who remember their history lessons, his double reference to Roman corruption and the alliterative image of Rome as a "pyramid of power" that will topple just as the legionary eagles will fall from their height implies not only the imminent overthrow of Nero but also the eventual fall of Rome – both due to the rise of Christianity, which will emerge triumphant after and despite the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus' death, shown during the prologue in a flashback, appears as a defeat only to unregenerate pagans: we in the audience, of course, know it for what it really was: the triumph of the meek and good over the haughty and evil.[12] Jesus dies for our spiritual freedom in *Quo Vadis*; in his own film, so will Spartacus.

The same perspective recurs in Henry Koster's *The Robe* (1953), the first film to be released in the widescreen format that would come to predominate epic filmmaking from now on.[13] The studio considered a religious and Roman topic more suitable to introduce its new technology than a film with a contemporary story. (Jean Negulesco's widescreen comedy *How to Marry A Millionaire* had gone into production before *The Robe* but was released after it.) The protagonist of *The Robe* is an aristocratic Roman who with his fiancée converts to Christianity; both die for their faith rather than accept life under the mad tyrant Caligula. The plot is a variation on that of *Quo Vadis*, but this time the main character introduces the story himself. While he speaks, we see, first, a brief shot of gladiators in the arena, then a series of images illustrating what he tells us. Main emphasis is on military power, on foreign wealth and slaves pouring into Rome, and, at the end, on the city's slave market. Marcellus Gallio, our hero, is still a pagan, so he does not mention Christianity. Instead, he refers to the evil of slavery. His critical observations prepare us for the fact that he will turn out to be a good Roman by becoming a Christian. The victory of Christianity is again the chief topic since the

12 Cf. Jesuit author Michael Walsh, *The Triumph of the Meek: Why Early Christianity Succeeded* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), and historian of religion Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

13 Cf. Lev, *Transforming the Screen 1950–1959*, 107–125 and 325–327 (notes), a chapter entitled "Technology and Spectacle."

film's titular garment is the one worn by Jesus at the crucifixion. Marcellus' perspective of Rome and its imperialism will have been familiar to anyone in the theater:

> Rome, master of the earth in the eighteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius. Our legions stand guard on the boundaries of civilization, on the foggy coasts of the northern seas to the ancient rivers of Babylon – the finest fighting machines in history. The people of thirty lands send us tribute: their gold and silk, ivory and frankincense, and their proudest sons to be our slaves. We have reached the point where there are more slaves in Rome than citizens. Some say that we are only looters of what others have created, that we create nothing ourselves. But we have made gods, fine gods and goddesses . . . For the power lies not in *their* hands of marble but in ours of flesh. We, the nobles of Rome, are free to live only for our own pleasure. Could any god offer us more?
>
> Today we traffic in human souls. The slave market is crowded . . .

Militarism and loot, the false freedom to indulge in empty pleasures, the immense exploitation of slaves – the film's wholesale condemnation of Romans who were not Christians is evident. The prologue cleverly manages to increase its indictment by referring to something that ancient authors themselves mentioned on several occasions: more slaves than masters.[14] Americans were ready to apply this circumstance to their own society. Even before the birth of the U.S., future Founding Father George Mason wrote in 1765: "One of the first signs of the decay and perhaps the primary cause of the destruction of the most flourishing government that ever existed was the introduction of great numbers of slaves, an evil very pathetically described by Roman historians."[15]

As was the case with *Quo Vadis*, *The Robe* implies that the pyramid of pagan power is doomed to fall. Slaves are to have a decisive hand in its overthrow. None other than the man at the top, Emperor Tiberius, as much as says so himself. Having been informed about the fate of Jesus, he foresees the end of Rome:

> Miracles – disciples – slaves running away . . . When it comes, this is how it will start. Some obscure martyr in some forgotten province; then

14 Such or related statements for the early empire occur several times in Tacitus (*Annals* 3.53.5, 4.27.3, 14.43.4 and 44.5). The view had regained prominence in the nineteenth century; for a corrective analysis see C. G. Starr, "An Overdose of Slavery," *The Journal of Economic History*, 18 (1958), 17–32. Cf. also Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, expanded edn.; ed. Brent D. Shaw (Princeton: Wiener, 1998), 147–153. Finley's book first appeared in 1980.

15 Quoted from Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 95–96; source reference at 266 note 22.

> madness, infecting the legions, rotting the empire; then the finish of Rome . . . This is more dangerous than any spell . . . It is man's desire to be free. It is the greatest madness of them all.

Tiberius in this film is a benign and understanding father figure, whose plot function is to provide a sharp contrast to his successor Caligula. But the last sentence quoted brands even this kind of Roman ruler as thoroughly un-American. Tiberius cannot be completely good because he is a pagan and will remain one. In this he contrasts with Marcellus, who will eventually denounce the tyrannical madman Caligula and thereby seal his fate. But Marcellus' death is a spiritual victory. He and his beloved, condemned to martyrdom for their new faith, walk out of Caligula's palace and, by means of a change in the background image, appear to go straight up to heaven. Only the sky is visible behind them, and a disembodied chorus is singing "Hallelujah" on the soundtrack.

The story of *The Robe* continues in Delmer Daves's *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954). Marcellus' slave Demetrius has become a Christian and is now a gladiator. He defies Caligula and is instrumental in Caligula's assassination, but he does not have to die. He also achieves his freedom. The pattern set in these films continues in the most famous Roman epic of all, William Wyler's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1959). It has another omniscient narrator, whom we will later encounter in the role of Balthazar. He informs us that in the year of Christ's birth "Judaea for nearly a century had lain under the mastery of Rome." Jerusalem was "dominated by the fortress of Antonia, the seat of Roman power," and our early glimpses of the Romans are exclusively of soldiers and legions. "Even while they obeyed the will of Caesar," the narrator concludes, the people of Judaea kept hoping for their "redeemer," someone "to bring them salvation and perfect freedom."

Old Testament stories are liable to exhibit the same perspective. At the beginning of his last film, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), producer-director Cecil B. De Mille himself appears on the screen and explains to the audience the significance, then and now, of Moses, Rameses, and the Israelites' exodus from Egypt:

> we have an unusual subject: the story of the birth of freedom . . . The theme of this picture is whether men are to be ruled by God's law or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today. Our intention was not to create a story but to be worthy of the divinely inspired story created three thousand years ago.

De Mille's pious attitude, whether genuine or not, tells us how to understand what is to follow on the screen. Despite the modern overtones that characterize his prologue and the way he presents his subject matter – the Cold-War atmosphere of the 1950s is palpable in both – and despite his well-known McCarthyite bias, De Mille's main purpose is uplift rather than politics.[16]

Spartacus is indebted to such films for its perspective on history, even without the facile opposition of evil pagans and good Christians on view in most of Hollywood's Roman films. To faithful filmgoers, the prologue of *Spartacus* contains nothing new, and its reference to Christianity in a story set decades before its appearance is no surprise. But the standard view of the Romans now receives a more specifically American turn. Again an omniscient narrator cues us in, this time not over images of Rome or its environs as in *Quo Vadis* or *The Robe* but over images of slaves working a stone quarry on the farthest frontier. They illustrate the unlimited and inhuman power Rome holds over the entire world. The narrator begins:

> In the last century before the birth of the new faith called Christianity, which was destined to overthrow the pagan tyranny of Rome and bring about a new society, the Roman republic stood at the very center of the civilized world. "Of all things fairest," sang the poet, "first among cities and home of the gods is golden Rome." Yet even at the zenith of her pride and power the republic lay fatally stricken with a disease called human slavery. The age of the dictator was at hand, waiting in the shadows for the event to bring it forth.

The opening sequence of *Spartacus* is one of the most effective in the entire film and presents the best visual exposition to what is to follow. It was filmed by Anthony Mann, the original director of *Spartacus*, in Death Valley. The suffering of the slaves and the shots of Roman guards and slave drivers that we watch belie the narrator's words about civilization. for what, we are to infer, can be civilized in such a world? The closed system of Roman power is a precondition for the film's plot, but in the last century B.C. Rome was still far from its eventual expansion over all or most other countries or civilizations. For the sake of historical accuracy, the narrator calls Rome a republic, but his description of Rome as, again, a kind of pyramid of power and moral corruption – note the imagery of high and low as in the prologue to *Quo Vadis* – fits the Roman

16 On the political undertones of this film see Alan Nadel, "God's Law and the Wide Screen: *The Ten Commandments* as Cold War 'Epic'," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 108 (1993), 415–430.

Empire much better.[17] Marcellus' statement in *The Robe* – "There are more slaves in Rome than citizens" – finds an almost verbatim restatement in *Spartacus*: "There are more slaves in Rome than Romans," a senator will later observe. So the narrator's quotation of ancient praise of the greatness of Rome is meant to ring hollow. More accurately, he should have said "the poets" rather than "the poet" because he combines quotations from two Roman authors. Both wrote after the time of Spartacus; their words are quoted in retrospect. The first part is from Virgil: *rerum . . . pulcherrima Roma*.[18] The second part is from Ausonius, who lived in the fourth century A.D. and began his *Ordo urbium nobilium*, a series of poetic eulogies of twenty ancient cities, with a one-line praise of Rome: *Prima urbes inter, divum domus, aurea Roma*. Ausonius was one of the major Christian authors of late antiquity but seems to have written these poems when he was still a pagan. Virgil, the great poet of Augustan Rome, remained a pagan but eventually had an *anima naturaliter Christiana*, a soul Christian by nature, attributed to him.[19] To the well-educated among the film's audiences, the prologue's combined quotation reinforces the mention of Christianity.[20] Only Christian or naturally Christian Romans are good Romans. From such a point of view, references to destiny and a new birth over images of a valley of death are entirely in order. But spiritual renewal demands the end of the old, which is already carrying a fatal disease. The film's theme of victory in and through death is already evident. In the narrator's apocalyptic words, the end of the Roman republic occurs in the "age of the dictator." Historically, this dictator is Julius Caesar. In *Spartacus*, Caesar learns his political lessons from Crassus, Spartacus' antagonist and the film's villain. The narrator now becomes more explicitly American about all this while continuing the theme of birth and death:

17 The Spartacus novel by Maurice Ghirassia, *Arena* (New York: Viking, 1969), 5, refers to the "Roman Empire" of 87 B.C., that by Jacques Perdue, *Slave and Master* (New York: Macaulay, 1960), 107, has Spartacus envision himself as "Emperor of Imperial Rome." Attentive listeners who are watching *Spartacus* for a second or third time may wonder why the actor whom they will soon see as the foolish and ignoble aristocrat Glabrus is taking the part of an enlightened – i.e., modern and Christian – commentator. This edifying prologue was one of the last additions made to *Spartacus* before its release, but it had been planned from the beginning.

18 Virgil, *Georgics* 2.534.

19 The phrase is adapted from Tertullian, *Apology* 17.6.

20 There is a precedent for this. Lewis Grassic Gibbon (pseudonym of James Leslie Mitchell) began the first chapter of his novel *Spartacus* (1933) with the following epigraph and ended the novel with a repetition of it: "It was Springtime in Italy, a hundred years before the crucifixion of Christ." See the authoritative edition of Gibbon, *Spartacus* (1990; rpt. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2005), 3 and 210.

> In that same century, in the conquered Greek province of Thrace, an illiterate slave woman added to her master's wealth by giving birth to a son whom she named Spartacus. A proud, rebellious son, who was sold to living death in the mines of Libya before his thirteenth birthday. There, under whip and chain and sun, he lived out his youth and his young manhood, dreaming the death of slavery two thousand years before it finally *would* die.

Historical sources report that Spartacus had been born free; he may even have been of royal lineage.[21] Here his birth into slavery is analogous to the status of slaves in the ante-bellum American South and helps make his situation and his later rebellion readily understandable to all viewers. It is also meant to reinforce to them Spartacus' extraordinary achievement: his spiritual journey from the lowest of the low to an inspiring model who comes close to achieving freedom for himself and others. In the quarry, Spartacus is utterly removed from anything like liberty and dignity, and the narrator's emphasis on his youth and the abuse we witness him enduring in that hell call forth our sense of compassion. From the very beginning we root for the underdog. Particularly significant is the narrator's last sentence. It contains a quintessential American image, that of the dream as a symbol of noble aspiration, expressed in the familiar term *the American Dream*. The sentence also anticipates the most famous and stirring expression of this idea in connection with slavery and freedom: the speech Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, the high point of the March on Washington, D.C.[22] It became famous for King's refrain "I have a dream." Spartacus, we are told, has one, too. That his story is to be understood in American terms becomes even clearer with the narrator's mention of the death of slavery. From 73 B.C., the year in which Spartacus' revolt began, to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation it is

21 His name may indicate that Spartacus was a descendant of the dynasty of the Spartocids, founded by Spartocus (Spartokos or Spartakos) I., the ruler of the *Bosporanum regnum* in the late fifth century B.C. Cf. Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History* 12.31.1 and 12.36.1. Cf. Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.–70 B.C.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989; rpt. 1998), on gladiators as "first-generation slaves." In the fourth century A.D., however, the philosopher and orator Themistius states that Spartacus and Crixus were slaves by birth (*Speeches* 7.87a). On Themistius cf. Roberto Orena, *Rivolta e rivoluzione: Il Bellum di Spartaco nella crisi della repubblica e la riflessione storiografica moderna* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1984), 249–259.

22 For a summary account with photographs and the text of King's speech see Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965* (1987; rpt. New York: Penguin, 2002), 196–205. The book is a companion to a six-hour documentary film of the same title, directed by Harry Hampton.

1,936 years, close enough to the narrator's "two thousand years" to indicate that America best represents mankind's progress from slavery to freedom. Spartacus' innate qualities of pride in himself as a human being and his rebelliousness, a necessary precondition to shake off the yoke of servitude, are American strengths, embodied from the beginning in the Founding Fathers. And Spartacus' low birth foreshadows the film's later analogies of him with another redeemer, one whose humble birth about a century after Spartacus' led to the death of mankind's spiritual enslavement, at least in the retrospective view of modern America.

Unlike this American Spartacus, the historical Spartacus cannot have been "dreaming the death of slavery," and to impute such a motive to him is anachronistic.[23] No birth, then, of a new society, with or without Christianity. *Spartacus* is not a lesson in Roman history, but it is a lesson in how Americans conceive of history and of themselves. An unsigned essay published in 1823 in *The Christian Spectator* shows how deeply the prologue to *Spartacus* and the plot of the entire film are rooted in American culture. The author's assessment of the state of slaves in America parallels *Spartacus* in its perspective on ancient Rome and in its presentation of Spartacus as a freedom fighter who might have changed history but whose revolt is brutally suppressed. After calculating that the American slave population will rise to millions and millions over the next several decades if nothing is done about slavery, the author concludes:

> Plots! and insurrections! These are words of terror, but their terribleness is no argument against the truth of what we say . . . For notwithstanding all that may be done to keep the slaves in ignorance, they are learning, and will continue to learn something of their own power, and something of the tenure by which they are held in bondage. They are surrounded by the memorials of freedom. The air which they breathe is free; and the soil on which they tread, and which they water with their tears is a land of liberty. Slaves are never slow in learning that they are fettered, and that freedom is the birthright of humanity. Our slaves will not be always ignorant – and when that righteous Providence, which never wants instruments to accomplish its designs, whether of mercy, or of vengeance, shall raise up a Touissaint [*sic*], or a Spartacus, or an African Tecumseh, his fellow slaves will flock around his standard, and we shall witness scenes – which history describes but from the thought of which the imagination revolts. Not that

23 Cf. the views of Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1974), 20 and 406, and Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.–70 B.C.*, 98–101, both quoted in my "Introduction" to the present volume, 11–12.

> there is any reason to anticipate such an insurrection as will result in the emancipation of the slaves, and the establishment of a black empire . . . to be finally successful, it must be delayed . . . till the blacks have force enough to resist successfully the energies of the whole American people; for . . . the beacon fires of insurrection would only rally the strength of the nation, and the illiated Africans, if not utterly exterminated, would be so nearly destroyed that they must submit to a bondage more hopeless than ever.[24]

These words almost summarize the plot of *Spartacus*, except for the moral victory that Spartacus achieves in his defeat and death. Less than a decade later, Spartacus came into his own in popular culture. American playwright Robert Montgomery Bird had his greatest success with *The Gladiator* (1831), a drama about Spartacus that ran for more than a thousand performances, with famous actor Edwin Forrest in the title part. Walt Whitman wrote about it in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of December 26, 1846:

> This play is as full of 'Abolitionism' as an egg is of meat . . . Running o'er with sentiments of liberty – with eloquent disclaimers of the right of the Romans to hold human beings in bondage – it is a play, this Gladiator, calculated to make the hearts of the masses swell responsively to all those nobler manlier aspirations in behalf of mortal freedom! – The speech of Spartacus, in which he attributes the grandeur and wealth of Rome, to her devastation of other countries, is fine: and Mr. Forrest delivered it passing well.[25]

Spartacus, the inspiring figure of legend or myth far more than the historical Spartacus, is close to Americans' hearts. Howard Fast's novel *Spartacus* (1951) and its screen adaptation continue the tradition.

But the film and its prologue also express the views of one particular modern American. Kirk Douglas, the producer and star of *Spartacus*, was the son of poor and illiterate Russian Jewish immigrants. They exemplified the sentiments of Emma Lazarus' sonnet *The New Colossus* (1883),

24 *The Christian Spectator*, 5 no. 10 (October 1, 1823), 540–551, in a section entitled "Review of New Publications"; quotation at 542. This is the second part of an essay reviewing *The Reports of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour in the United States* for 1818–1823; its first part appeared in the journal's preceding issue (5 no. 9 [September 1, 1823], 485–494).

25 Walt Whitman, "'The Gladiator' – Mr. Forrest – Acting"; quoted from *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Journalism*, vol. 2: *1846–1848*, ed. Herbert Bergman (New York: Lang, 2003), 158–159; quotation at 158. Wyke, *Projecting the Past*, 58, provides an illustration of Forrest as Spartacus. For a cinematic anecdote involving Spartacus' speech see Paul F. Boller and Ronald L. Davis, *Hollywood Anecdotes* (New York: Morrow, 1987), 66–67.

in which the Statue of Liberty proclaims: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."[26] Douglas, a self-made man in the classic American mold, had read Fast's novel:

> I was intrigued with the story of Spartacus the slave, dreaming of the death of slavery, driving into the armor of Rome the wedge that would eventually destroy her.
>
> I'm always astounded by the impact, the extent of the Roman Empire . . . How did the Romans get to so many places? . . . It always amazed me *how* they did that, and how *much* they did.
>
> Looking at these [Roman] ruins, and at the Sphinx and the pyramids in Egypt, at the palaces in India, I wince. I see thousands and thousands of slaves carrying rocks, beaten, starved, crushed, dying. I identify with them. As it says in the Torah: "Slaves were we unto Egypt." I come from a race of slaves. That would have been *my* family, *me*.
>
> *Spartacus* would make a terrific picture.[27]

Douglas's view of Spartacus was somewhat at odds with Fast's.[28] As a result, the film lost most of the novel's explicit politics, and for this reason

26 Quoted from Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems*, ed. John Hollander (New York: The Library of America, 2005), 58.

27 Kirk Douglas, *The Ragman's Son: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 304. Cf. Douglas, 333–334. Identification with Spartacus is also the case for Maurice Ghnassia, who fought in the French Resistance in World War II: "In the Resistance group to which I belonged, we lived just the same way runaways and guerrilleros have lived throughout the world for thousands of years . . . understood more and more Spartacus' problems at every engagement, in every dangerous situation, during every difficult moment . . . I knew his problems: we were living them." Quoted from "Author's Note" to *Arena*, xiii–xv; quotation at xiv. Although written in French, this book was published in English; Ghnassia had been living in the United States since 1956.

28 Cf. Douglas, *The Ragman's Son*, 306–310 and 314. Cf. also Baxter, *Stanley Kubrick*, 123–125. For Fast's perspective on Spartacus in both novel and film see Howard Fast, *Being Red: A Memoir* (1990; rpt. Armonk and London: Sharpe, 1994), 269, 276–277, and 286–300. Fast summarized his experiences in "*Spartacus* and the Blacklist," an introduction to a reprint of *Spartacus* (Armonk: Sharpe / North Castle Books, 1996), vii–viii. But the dedication page of Fast's novel is fully in the American vein: "The heroes of this story cherished freedom and human dignity, and lived nobly and well. I wrote it so that those who read it . . . may take strength for our own troubled future and that they may struggle against oppression and wrong – so that the dream of Spartacus may come to be in our own time." Cf. also Andrew Macdonald, *Howard Fast: A Critical Companion* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1996), 83–100, and Carl Hoffman, "The Evolution of a Gladiator: History, Representation, and Revision in *Spartacus*," *Journal of American and Contemporary Cultures*, 23 no. 1 (2000), 63–70. Futrell, "Seeing Red," 99, and Marcus Junkelmann, *Hollywoods Traum von Rom: "Gladiator" und die Tradition des Monumentalfilms* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2004), 164, regard the very first image of *Spartacus* – its credit sequence begins with a sculpted hand pointing left – as an indication of the left-wing nature of the film, but this is not convincing. (The body to which a left-pointing hand is attached is on the right.) Rather, the hand, reminiscent of God's hand imparting the spark

right-wing protests like the one by influential columnist Hedda Hopper were largely ineffective: "That story was sold to Universal from a book written by a Commie and the screen script was written by a Commie, so don't go to see it."[29] Instead, *Spartacus* became a mainstream American work.[30] Its prologue has prepared us for an all-American Spartacus, and a number of key scenes make this side of him explicit.

2. Black and White: The Spark of Freedom

In *Spartacus*, new arrivals at the gladiatorial school are branded on their haunches with irons like cattle – a custom unknown in ancient Rome.[31]

of life to Adam in Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, is a hint at the film's real theme: the creation of a new man free from the bonds of slavery and inhumanity. A year earlier, the actual image of Michelangelo's painting of the creation of Adam provided the background for the credits of Wyler's *Ben-Hur*, a more apposite, if also more pretentious, model for the hand in *Spartacus*.

29 Quoted from Douglas, *The Ragman's Son*, 332. According to the extremely right-wing John Birch Society, the film was "well-camouflaged" Communist propaganda (Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, 31 note 1). That *Spartacus* was not primarily a political work even to Dalton Trumbo, its blacklisted screenwriter, becomes evident from Jeffrey P. Smith, "'A Good Business Proposition': Dalton Trumbo, *Spartacus*, and the End of the Blacklist," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 23 (Spring, 1989), 75–100. The quotation in Smith's title is from a letter by Trumbo and reports a statement by the lawyer for Douglas's Bryna Productions to hire blacklisted writers as a means to obtain high-quality screenplays at extremely low cost; cf. Smith, 84 and 95. Smith, 92, quotes the following examples of press reactions to *Spartacus*: "There is nothing more subversive in 'Spartacus' than [is] contained in the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment" (*The Hollywood Reporter*); "Trumbo has imparted to *Spartacus* a passion for freedom and the men who live and die for it – a passion that transcends all politics" (*Time*). Cf. Smith, 93: "Dalton Trumbo, who had been considered 'un-American' in 1947, emerged in 1960 as an American hero." Smith, 92, quotes a letter by Kirk Douglas describing *Spartacus* as "a courageous and positive statement about mankind's most cherished goal – freedom" months before the film was released. On Trumbo and *Spartacus* see further the brief summary provided s. v. "Trumbo, Dalton," in Gene D. Phillips and Rodney Hill, *The Encyclopedia of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Facts on File, 2002), 372–376 (with minor misquotations of the film's dialogue).

30 The comment by Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 110, that Douglas "saw *Spartacus* as an opportunity to make a large-scale Zionist statement" is therefore unconvincing. (Similarly Junkelmann, *Hollywoods Traum von Rom*, 158.) Contrast the following comment by Woody Strode: "Kirk Douglas didn't admit he was Jewish until ten years after *Spartacus*." Quoted from Woody Strode and Sam Young, *Goal Dust: An Autobiography* (Lanham, New York, and London: Madison Books, 1990), 248. A Zionist statement by Douglas came six years after Spartacus with Melville Shavelson's *Cast a Giant Shadow*, an epic film about the early history of Israel.

31 On this see C. P. Jones, "Tattooing and Branding in Greco-Roman Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies*, 77 (1987), 139–155, and E. Hugh Thompson, *The Archaeology of*

This prepares viewers for the inhuman treatment they will receive. ("I'm not an animal!" Spartacus will soon be driven to exclaim.) Their trainer, a former slave and gladiator, tells them that he wants to be their friend and that both sides have to get along with each other, but nobody believes him. Friendship can exist only between and among the gladiators. By contrast, Draba, the most imposing and the only black gladiator in the school, refuses to be anyone's friend. He tells Spartacus: "Gladiators don't make friends. If we're ever matched in the arena together, I'll have to kill you." This prepares us for the inevitable: Draba and Spartacus will have to fight each other, and the more experienced Draba will defeat Spartacus. But an epic hero cannot die this early in his story, so a plot twist saves him and provides him with the inspiration to revolt when the moment is right. At the end of their duel Draba is holding his trident to Spartacus' throat; the latter, in close-up, braces himself for death. But reverse-angle close-ups on Draba's face reveal to us his innate nobility: he is thinking of the inhumanity of what he has been forced into doing. Repeatedly taunted by the aristocratic Romans for whose pleasure he has been selected to fight ("Kill him! Kill him, you imbecile!"), Draba instead hurls his trident at Crassus and climbs up the balustrade to attack him. He is hit by a guard's spear in the back but manages to get a hold on Crassus' legs. Crassus cuts the sinews between Draba's shoulders, and the dying man falls to the ground. In a close-up his blood had spurted on Crassus' face, a visual sign of the dehumanizing nature of slavery. Spartacus witnesses everything. An intense and lingering close-up on his face immediately following Draba's off-screen death points to the impact of Draba's sacrifice on Spartacus. The man who refused to be anyone's friend has displayed greater nobility of spirit than any other gladiator, including Spartacus. Before the gladiatorial combats had started, Spartacus and his friend Crixus had worried about having to fight each other. Asked by Crixus "Would you try to kill me?" Spartacus replied: "Yes, I'd kill. I'd try to stay alive, and so would you." Draba had expressed a similar view in his first conversation with Spartacus but did not follow through. He lost his life but gained his dignity. The lesson is not lost on Spartacus.

At night the gladiators walk downstairs to their dungeon-like quarters and find Draba's body hanging upside down by the ankles like the carcass of an animal at a butcher's shop – an explicit warning: "He'll

Greek and Roman Slavery (London: Duckworth, 2003), 241–242 (section entitled "Marks of Identification"). Romans branded animals, especially horses, with hot irons. Americans brand cattle. The scene in Perdue, *Slave and Master*, 89–90, that refers to the Roman custom of branding slaves shows that this author is chiefly interested in sadism and sex, preferably in conjunction

rebellious slaves later cut Draba down. Spartacus presumably will hang on the cross till he rots.

Draba prepares the way for Spartacus. Actor Strode was to play a twentieth-century redeemer in Valerio Zurlini's *Seduto alla sua destra* ("Seated at His Right," 1968), a film based on the life of Patrice Lumumba. Its American distributor retitled it *Black Jesus*. Strode wrote about this part in his autobiography:

> I play a Christ-like character who tries to establish peaceful reform with an unnamed African country that's controlled by an overbearing white rule. I travel from village to village preaching to the people. I tell them, "As long as we are united we cannot be defeated. they know this and this is why they will try and infiltrate among you setting brother against brother, and relying on your greed."
>
> The government arrests me for being a revolutionary and orders me to sign papers that would make me forsake my teachings. I refuse. They begin to torture me: I suffer and anguish. They nail my hands to a table. They beat me until I lose my sight. My left side is pierced. The life slowly drains out of me. My face is twisted in pain, and my legs go limp as they drag me from the interrogation room back to my cell. The violence is unbelievable.
>
> Zurlini was trying to show the total devotion to violence of the men who were torturing me, and the horrors of a dictator-style government.[38]

Today, those unfamiliar with Zurlini's small but distinguished body of work may here be reminded of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Fortunately, Zurlini's film has nothing in common with Gibson's. But it is telling that one and the same actor plays comparable parts of heroic fighters for freedom and dignity within a decade. Both apparently fail and are killed by their ruthless and powerful enemies, but both win spiritual victories and become martyrs. The same is true for Spartacus. Draba is not only a spiritual model who teaches Spartacus about nobility and dignity but also functions as an illustration of how race relations in the U.S. have begun to progress on the verge of the Civil Rights movement. The fight of Spartacus and Draba is the reversal of a similar scene in *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, Hollywood's last gladiatorial epic before *Spartacus*. It featured William Marshall, an imposing black actor, in a prominent role (with screen credit) as a gladiator. (Strode had an uncredited bit part, also as a gladiator.) Demetrius, the white gladiator, is forced to fight the black gladiator. As in *Spartacus*, the black fighter is more experienced than the white. They only pretend to fight in the hope that the crowd will spare their lives. But their ruse is discovered, and they have to fight in earnest. As may have been expected in 1954, the white gladiator defeats the black gladiator, who nobly resigns himself to his fate: "Cut clean, friend!" But a hero cannot kill a defenseless man, and Demetrius appeals to Caligula. His request is granted, although at the risk of his own life. "Macro, go down and cut the dog's throat," the evil tyrant commands his Praetorian Prefect. Messalina's interference saves Demetrius from this fate, although he is now forced to fight against tigers. Demetrius kills them and becomes a hero to the crowd. He and the black gladiator live to see the overthrow and death of Caligula.

38 Strode and Young, *Goal Dust*, 234. Strode dedicated this book to three people (among them John Ford) "and the proposition that all men are created equal." If Lumumba was a Christ figure in Zurlini's film, he could have been a Spartacus in reality; cf. Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, 23–24, on the civil war in the Congo at the time of *Spartacus*: "It was reported that the nation's beleaguered crypto-Communist leader, Patrice Lumumba, was trying to reach New York – another potential Spartacus defying Rome."

This scene is not as intense in its effect on audiences as the sequence of Draba's and Spartacus' fight, which much more pointedly expresses the analogy to contemporary American race relations. In a mainstream 1960 film, a black man still cannot kill a white man, and a white cannot simply kill a black, even if they are forced into a deadly confrontation. So the outcome of Spartacus' and Draba's fight is unavoidable. The figure of less importance for the plot wins, spares the hero's life, and sacrifices himself. In this fight sequence, Kubrick pushes his audiences as far into an awareness of contemporary racial tensions as possible. He does so in purely visual terms and without any dialogue. Before the fights, Spartacus, Crixus, Draba, and a fourth gladiator wait outside the arena in the dark entrance passage. The fence of the arena and the surrounding gloom symbolize their status as slaves and their spiritual imprisonment. After Crixus and the fourth gladiator are called in to fight, Draba and Spartacus remain behind in brooding silence. Kubrick now makes excellent use of his film's widescreen format. He first shows Draba and Spartacus waiting, placed far apart from each other at the opposite ends of the frame. Close-ups on their faces then reveal what they must be thinking and feeling. In these shots Kubrick brings them nearer to us to increase our emotional involvement. At the same time he keeps them distant from each other: only one face appears on the screen at a time. During these tense moments the two men briefly look at each other a few times but mainly keep their eyes averted. Through the space between two wooden boards in the door Spartacus watches the fight in the arena. Kubrick then cuts to a shot that shows us what Spartacus sees. Most of the screen is dark, and the duel Spartacus is observing appears in a wide and narrow band in the center. The aspect ratio of this point-of-view shot imitates the screen's format. Experienced cinemagoers will notice Kubrick's triple level of visual presentation: they are watching, from the

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dark, a screen on which someone with whom they are meant to identify is watching. From the dark, a scene of death. Spartacus' and our spectatorship become inseparable.[19] With Spartacus, emotionally involved viewers feel a strong sense of isolation, helplessness, and impending doom. While Spartacus, in a close-up screen right, is still watching, Kubrick cuts to a medium close-up of Draba screen left. Then both men look at each other. This reinforces our sense of the inhumanity of slavery. Intercutting continues more rapidly. Draba, further away from us than Spartacus, smiles mysteriously. This moment, in which he seems to resolve to fight but not to kill, prepares us for the later moment when he spares Spartacus and makes this surprising plot turn more plausible to us.

Spartacus looks out again, and with him we see the end of the fight that had been in progress. Crixus kills his opponent, and Kubrick immediately cuts back to a medium shot of where Draba and Spartacus are waiting. As Spartacus' back is still toward us, Draba turns and looks at Spartacus, who now also turns around. Both men look at each other again, but only Draba now receives a close-up – the last one. A medium shot shows us both men again, with Draba looking down in a pose of Stoic acceptance. The door is opened, and we see the dead gladiator being dragged from the arena. Crixus returns. Draba and Spartacus exchange a final glance, then enter the arena. After they salute the Romans, they turn to face each other. As enemies, they are standing on opposite ends of the screen. The fight begins.

The scene of Spartacus and Draba awaiting their fight is remarkable for its style, which drives home the contemporary point by bringing its viewers close up to the unspoken racial tension between black and white. In 1960, a white and a black man are face to face, figuratively (as enemies) and literally (through Kubrick's cross-cutting and close-ups). But they and we realize that they are not really enemies. They are victims of an entrenched system that is degrading to both and has to be overcome. As ancient slaves and gladiators they are in chains to the power of Rome; as stand-ins for Americans they illustrate the dilemma of modern race relations. This, too, has to be overcome. Spartacus and Draba do not succeed, but they fight the good fight and point the way for others. The Americans have not succeeded in 1960, but the Civil Rights movement is already on the march.[40] What Martin Luther King said in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial fits *Spartacus* at this point in its story: "The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

39 This is a fundamental aspect of cinema, important for *Spartacus*. Cf. Ina Rae Hark, "Animals or Romans: Looking at Masculinity in *Spartacus*," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 151–172, and Leon Hunt, "What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic," in *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, ed. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), 65–83. (The main title of the latter book is a misquotation.) In general see the classic study by Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16 no. 3 (1975), 6–18; rpt. in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14–26, and in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 22–34.

3. United We Stand

After Spartacus and his fellow gladiators have revolted, they ravage the countryside, looting the villas of rich Romans. Two of these we see being dragged to the gladiators' school, in whose arena their captors force them into a mock gladiatorial fight. But Spartacus intervenes. He has just returned from his former quarters. When he went downstairs, the rope from which Draba's body had been hanging is prominently visible. Kubrick uses the same downward-gliding camera movement for Spartacus descending the stairs with which he had first shown us the gladiators seeing Draba's corpse. This stylistic parallel evokes a strong remembrance in us. So it does in Spartacus, who stands near the rope for a pensive moment. We are to understand that he is thinking of Draba's death and of the freedom he never came to be part of. But Draba's example exerts its influence on Spartacus. When he enters the arena through the same door by which he and Draba had entered it for their fight, Spartacus is filmed emerging on the other side, and the image is much brighter, a hint that things are now better. Spartacus reveals his innate qualities as leader and decent human being in a heroic low-angle shot, the arena entrance visible behind him, and ends the mockery of the Romans. When Crixus objects – "I want to see their blood, right over here where Draba died" – Spartacus replies:

40 For information on the background of the Civil Rights movement cf. especially Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988; rpt. 1989), and Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*. Branch's book is the first of three volumes on King; it was followed by *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998; rpt. 1999) and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). The titles indicate that King was an American Moses.

> I made myself a promise, Crixus. I swore that if I ever got out of this place . . . I'd die before I'd watch two men fight to the death again. Draba made that promise, too. He kept it. So will I. What are we, Crixus? What are we becoming? Romans? Have *we* learned nothing? What's happening to us? We looked for wine when we should be hunting bread . . . You can't just be a gang of drunken raiders.

Referring to Draba's nobility, Spartacus intends to show his fellow slaves that in order to fight for freedom and dignity they must resist the temptation to pay back their former masters in kind. To someone's question "What else can we be?" Spartacus replies: "Gladiators. An army of gladiators! There's never *been* an army like that . . . We can beat anything they send against us if we really want to. Once we're on the march . . . we'll free every slave in every town and village. Can anybody get a bigger army than that?" To this, everybody agrees, and we soon see scenes in which Spartacus' words become reality. "Come join us! All of you, come join us! Come on and join us!" The brotherhood of slaves is born.

Spartacus' words about an irresistible army of freedom fighters anticipate what Martin Luther King will put into comparable terms in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Spartacus might have expressed his vision in very similar terms, might even have done so word for word, with the obvious exception of his and his fellow slaves' need for armed defense:

> In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

Dignity and discipline Spartacus' army will acquire in due course and so be able to inflict defeat on superior Roman forces. The ignominious fate of Glabrus is telling, as his defeat and his account of it in the Roman Senate will make clear. Glabrus' incomprehension of the humanity of the oppressed ("They were only slaves!") contrasts with Spartacus' own words when he spares his life and sends him back to Rome: "Tell them we want nothing from Rome. Nothing except our freedom!" The divisive party politics in Rome, especially between Crassus, whose henchman Glabrus is, and wily Senator Gracchus, further contrasts with the solidarity of Spartacus' people. Martin Luther King expresses Spartacus' view best if we replace his reference to skin color by one to slave status:

> I have a dream that my . . . children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character . . .

> With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

The unity and solidarity of the slaves appears again and again, most obviously when we watch them carrying out everyday tasks in their camps and when we follow them on their long and arduous journey to the sea in order to leave Italy and find a new home in peace and freedom. This march becomes a virtual exodus patterned on that in the Bible. Spartacus' message to Rome might as well have been: "Let my people go!" But the most compelling instance of the slaves' strong bond of fellowship comes after they have been defeated in a huge battle. Crassus, haunted by the myth of Spartacus, promises to spare the lives of all survivors if they identify Spartacus to him dead or alive. A moment of surprise and hesitation ensues, then Spartacus starts to rise to identify himself. But before he can do so, the other prisoners, first a few, then more, and finally all, stand up and shout: "I'm Spartacus!" Crassus is defeated.

The scene is rightly famous and could be understood as an explicit left-wing moment that reflects the genesis of the film from Howard Fast's novel or the political views of screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. It has been so interpreted, but it is better understood as an American expression of human brotherhood regardless of any specific political convictions. The scene re-enacts one of the most famous and popular patriotic American sayings that goes back to before the American Revolution: *United We Stand, Divided We Fall*. It appeared in slightly different form in a stanza of *The Liberty Song* by future Founding Father John Dickinson that was published in 1768:

> Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all,
> By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall:
> In so righteous a cause let us hope to succeed,
> For heaven approves of each generous deed.

Dickinson once observed that the Americans' disunity against the British had almost cost them their freedom, just as had been the case for the Greeks in the Persian Wars.[41] With Thomas Jefferson, Dickinson wrote a *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms* in 1775, although he was opposed to a separation from Britain and did not sign the Declaration of Independence.[42]

41 Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 108; reference at 267 note 47.

42 On Dickinson, who wrote as "Fabius" in the Federalist papers, and classical antiquity see Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 31–32, 54, 73, 76, 78, 88, 101, and 111–112.

American poet and journalist George Pope Morris began his patriotic poem *The Flag of Our Union*, collected in his *Poems* of 1853, with the following lines:

> "A song for our banner?" – The watchword recall
> Which gave the Republic her station:
> "United we stand – divided we fall!"
> It made and preserves us a nation!

On June 16, 1858, Abraham Lincoln touched on the same sentiment in his "A House Divided" speech to the Republican State Convention in Illinois after he had been elected the party's candidate for the U.S. Senate:

> We are now far into the *fifth* year, since a policy was initiated, with the *avowed* object, and *confident* promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation.
>
> Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, *not ceased*, but has *constantly augmented*.
>
> In *my* opinion, it *will* not cease, until a *crisis* shall have been reached, and passed.
>
> "A house divided against itself cannot stand."
>
> I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*.
>
> I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved* – I do not expect the house to *fall* – but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided.
>
> It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other.[43]

Lincoln quotes a famous saying by Jesus: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand."[44] During the Civil War, *United We Stand* was the rallying cry of the North against the secessionist South. The holy cause of freedom is now the holy cause of abolition, just as it later will become the holy cause of Civil Rights. In World War II, *United We Stand* again expressed American patriotism but found wider resonance. Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands said in her address to the U.S. Congress on August 5, 1942: "United we stand, and united we will achieve victory." These instances will suffice to indicate that narrower political stances – as when American labor unions adopted *United We Stand* as their slogan in the early twentieth century – are beside the point for *Spartacus*. Solidarity for the cause of freedom is a common American idea.

43 Quoted from Abraham Lincoln, "'A House Divided': Speech at Springfield, Illinois," in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 2 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953; rpt. 1960), 461–469; quotation at 461. On Lincoln as emancipator of slaves cf. now Richard Striner, *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

44 *Matth.* 12.25.

4. Sermon on the Mount

The slaves as precursors of the modern huddled masses yearning to be free appear in one of the most effective sequences of *Spartacus*. It pits Spartacus and his world against his enemy Crassus and the world of Rome. In Rome, Crassus addresses his legions on the day before they march out to battle the slave army. In the slaves' camp adjacent to a mountainside, Spartacus addresses his people after learning that the pirates hired to transport them out of Italy have betrayed them. Spartacus' speech carries strong American overtones; its setting is patterned on biblical epics. To get the appropriate visual effects, Kubrick filmed Spartacus and the slaves not in a natural location but in the studio. The obvious artifice indicates that Kubrick wanted to be able to control each nuance of presenting Spartacus and his speech. For even greater effect, he intercut the speeches of Spartacus and Crassus although they occur at different times: evening in Spartacus' camp, morning in Rome.

A close-up on Spartacus' face, intense with the weight of his responsibility, dissolves to an extreme long shot of him, standing screen right on the side of the mountain above the assembled crowd, his back to the viewer. This tells us that a decisive moment is at hand. Dedicated filmgoers and devout Christians alike may be reminded of the pictorial and cinematic iconography of the Sermon on the Mount, in particular the version they could have watched a year before in Wyler's *Ben-Hur*. Spartacus gives his people the news that departure from the Roman world is impossible. A closer shot now makes the crowd appear almost identical to that in a biblical film: flowing robes, hoods, and everyone's eyes turned upward in complete attention to the speaker. Then Kubrick cuts to a long shot of the Roman Forum, with some officers and Crassus screen right. The parallel to his set-up for Spartacus is intentional. Unlike Spartacus, Crassus receives a frontal close-up from slightly below eye level. A herald is proclaiming him First Consul and supreme commander of the armies. Crassus' frown expresses his ruthlessness. His title is an anachronism for ancient Rome, but it is appropriate as an indirect reference to another of history's power-hungry leaders: Napoleon, First Consul and later Emperor of France.

Back to Spartacus. Kubrick continues with the same shot, a strong contrast between Crassus and Spartacus because we had seen Crassus

alone while we see Spartacus before all his people. He is like a father to them. He tells them: "Rome will not allow us to escape from Italy. We have no choice but to march against Rome herself and end this war the only way it could have ended: by freeing every slave in Italy." This announcement is Spartacus' own emancipation declaration. Like Lincoln's, it serves two purposes: it shows the rightness of the slaves' cause, and it is of practical military value since it may cause major disruptions to the enemy's campaign. Only now, over the last words quoted, does Spartacus receive a close-up, but not a frontal one. He is filmed at a side angle of about forty-five degrees, as if he were standing between two crowds: his own people and those in the theater. We also see him from a slightly low angle, which puts the evening sky behind him. In this way Spartacus is elevated above all others and becomes almost godlike. (Compare the ending of *The Robe*.) More importantly, Spartacus' close-up is preceded by one of a young couple looking up at him in reverence, a shot familiar from practically all films about Jesus. The two close-ups express the close ties between Spartacus and his flock and between Spartacus and us. Comparable close-ups will continue throughout this scene.

Kubrick cuts to Rome and to the earlier close-up of Crassus. He contrasts Spartacus' words about universal freedom with Crassus' chilling promise of a universal power structure – his own tyranny, already predicted by Gracchus – and a final victory over the slaves: "I promise you a new Rome, a new Italy, and a new empire. I promise the destruction of the slave army and the restoration of order throughout all our territories." Long shots from different camera positions on soldiers and senators and a medium shot on Gracchus and Caesar listening emphasize Crassus' intimidating power.

Cut to Spartacus' close-up, with heaven behind him as before. His words are the opposite of Crassus' and stress the common humanity of the slaves: "I'd rather be here, a free man among brothers, facing a long march and a hard fight, than to be the richest citizen of Rome, fat with food he didn't work for and surrounded by slaves." These are noble sentiments from which no one in the theater will dissent. We, too, would rather be here with Spartacus than in Rome with Crassus. Unlike Crassus, Spartacus does not look rigidly ahead but moves his head back and forth; as a result, he even looks down from the screen directly at us in the audience. Over his words "a free man among brothers," Kubrick cuts to three medium close-ups of the crowd listening intently. He first shows a young girl embracing her aged mother, then groups of men. After these, he cuts back to Rome. By this time we know that the common people, young and old alike, are the antithesis of inhuman Rome. Whereas the Forum bristles with weapons and soldiers and Crassus is in

full military regalia, none of the slaves carries arms or wears a helmet or uniform.

Crassus now briefly appears from a different angle as he continues his speech, but at its climax he is shown again exactly as before: "I promise the living body of Spartacus for whatever punishment you may deem fit. That – or his head. This I vow by the spirits of all my forefathers. This I have sworn in the temple that guards their bones." Classically educated viewers may recognize the reference to Roman ancestry worship, but they and all others will conclude that Crassus' sense of religion is far from making him humane. His words "the living body of Spartacus" are pseudo-biblical and evoke reminiscences of similar expressions about Jesus.

Back to Spartacus. We see him again as at the beginning, in extreme long shot screen right on the mountainside. He now has the last words in this sequence:

> We've traveled a long ways together. We've fought many battles and won great victories. Now, instead of taking ship for our homes across the sea, we must fight again. Maybe there's no peace in this world for us or for anyone else. I don't know. But I do know that, as long as we live, we must stay true to ourselves. I do know that we're brothers, and I know that we're free.

American viewers may be reminded of the patriotic exhortation in *America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)*, the secular hymn composed in 1832 by Samuel Francis Smith, from which Martin Luther King quoted at the close of his speech at the Lincoln Monument: "From every mountainside / let freedom ring!" Spartacus' words are again accompanied by close-ups of his people: fathers with young children, old people, young girls, women and children. None of them, these shots imply, could pose the slightest threat to Rome; none of them would ever pose a threat to anybody if only they were treated decently. They are Everyman and Everywoman, and viewers can readily identify themselves with them: There, but for the grace of God, go I! This is reinforced by Kubrick's cut back to the extreme long shot of the crowd we have seen at the beginning. Then, over his familiar close-up, Spartacus calls out: "We march tonight!" Kubrick cuts back to a long shot of the Roman Forum, from which the legions are marching out. The image dissolves to the close-up of Crassus and back to more shots of the legions. For the first time Crassus now moves his head; his gaze follows his soldiers. The visual similarity with the movements of Spartacus' head points to a strong underlying contrast between them. Destructive and dehumanized militarism – there is not one close-up on any of the legionaries, whose individualism

is thereby denied them – stands against carefully individualized human decency. The final battle sequence with its clockwork Roman army maneuvers will make the same point with overwhelming power.[45] Now, at the close of the sequence in Rome, military fanfares and the sounds of soldiers in lockstep accompany the image. No music and no sound effects had accompanied the shots of Spartacus and his people. The image of the Romans on the march dissolves to a brief shot of Spartacus' people taking up their exodus again. The contrast of the Romans' gleaming armor and the somber and subdued but warm colors of the slaves' clothing summarizes the meaning of this sequence.

The studio setting for Spartacus' camp appears again during the night before the decisive battle. We are now at a different time and in a different place, but the atmosphere and lighting are almost the same as before, except for a different background. (Another matte seems to be in use.) Spartacus is again on a mountainside, looking down over the slaves' camp in the valley. He then descends and walks among his people. Many of them exchange greetings and smiles with Spartacus, their good shepherd. Several shots of families, an old couple, young children, asleep or awake, and men at a fire indicate harmony, unity, and innate peacefulness. They also reveal everybody's complete trust in Spartacus. Their faces show us the humanity that unites them among themselves and with us viewers. The beatitudes that Jesus pronounces at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount apply to these slaves: they are the poor in spirit, the meek, the pure in heart, and the ones who hunger and thirst after righteousness. They are the persecuted and reviled, the salt of the earth. In his sermon, Jesus compares such people to the prophets of old,

45 Cf. the comment by visual consultant Saul Bass, who designed the movements of the Roman army before the battle, in LoBrutto, *Stanley Kubrick*, 172–173: "I simply took the position that the Roman army was a highly mechanized and disciplined force and I wanted to suggest a certain precision, a mechanization and geometry. I created geometric patterns and had those patterns shift. So what you saw was like a moving painting, where forces would open up from the checkerboard form and would unite as a solid mass. The slaves had a lack of precision. They had no precise uniforms, they lined up but were never straight. We were trying to project the soulless Roman army against the soulful slave army." Not only is this an effective design appropriate, if fanciful, to the situation, but it is also in keeping with Kubrick's own interest in geometry, as with the checkerboard floor in *Paths of Glory* (1957), much of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the architecture in *Barry Lyndon* (1975), and the maze in *The Shining* (1980). The dehumanization of man is a major theme in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Eyes Wide Shut*, and *Artificial Intelligence: AI* (2001), a Kubrick project eventually directed by Steven Spielberg. Additional details from Kubrick's films illustrating these two interrelated themes could be added.

who suffered similar fates.[46] Spartacus' people are such prophets, harbingers of the eventual abolition of slavery. Subdued music, played mainly on strings, conveys a reverential atmosphere and resembles the music we associate with film scenes of Jesus. Occasionally, brief brass fanfares, also played softly, remind us of the decisive trial that awaits Spartacus and his people. The scene is lit somberly; chiaroscuro effects and warm brown tones predominate.

5. Crucifixion and Resurrection

Spartacus returns to his tent for his last private moments with Varinia, his wife and the future mother of his child. Some of their dialogue restates the film's main theme:

SPARTACUS: I imagine a god for slaves . . . and I pray.
VARINIA: What do you pray for?
SPARTACUS: I pray for a son who'll be born free.
VARINIA: I pray for the same thing.
SPARTACUS: Take care of my son, Varinia. If he never knows me, tell him who I was and what we dreamed of . . .
VARINIA: I can't live without you, Spartacus! . . .
SPARTACUS: Varinia, for you and me there can be no farewells. As long as one of us lives, we all live.

A god for slaves does not yet exist, but Jesus will come to be a god for all. From the vantage point of believers, Christianity will be the triumph of the meek, as *Quo Vadis*, *The Robe*, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, and *Ben-Hur* have already shown. Like Jesus, who dies on the cross but is eternal to his followers, Spartacus in his film dies on the cross but is eternal, not as a god but as a secular Messiah. In the Bible, Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life.[47] In this film, Spartacus is the way to freedom, the greatest American truth in life. His crucifixion, an invention that contradicts all historical evidence, is the best visual symbol that ideals and religion are as good as inseparable in America.[48] According to the Pledge

46 *Matth.* 5.3–13.
47 *John* 14.6.
48 The more astonished the filmmakers may have been had they known that a comparable fate was being propagated for Spartacus on the opposite site of the world: "As late as the 1960's, Soviet school books portrayed the dying Spartacus as a substitute for Christ crucified." Quoted from T. E. J. Wiedemann, *Slavery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 47; see there Plate 8 for an illustration of Spartacus on the cross.

of Allegiance to the Flag in the version current since 1954, the country is "one Nation under God," notwithstanding the separation of church and state that the Founding Fathers had instituted.[49]

Spartacus' words refer primarily to his family, but his last sentence quoted has greater resonance. Death is not the end to this Spartacus. There is a continuation. Spartacus has previously voiced his creed to the emissary of the pirates who will later turn out to be his Judas. Asked if he would fight even if he saw his army destroyed and himself killed, Spartacus replies in the affirmative. He explains:

> All men lose when they die, and all men die, but a slave and a free man lose different things. When a free man dies, he loses the *pleasure* of life. A slave loses his *pain*. Death is the only freedom a slave knows. That's why he's not afraid of it. That's why we'll win.

After death, freedom – a kind of life everlasting and a reminder of Draba's fate. Spartacus and the slaves do not win against Crassus, but their spiritual victory is self-evident. Death, where is thy sting, we might ask. Historically, Spartacus and the slaves only wanted to be free. According to Hollywood, Spartacus, like Jesus, came into the world to end the struggle, as he says on the mountainside, by making all men free. The savior achieves his victory at film's end when he is dying on the cross.[50] He sees

49 Cf. on this now Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006) and David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

50 The film is not the first re-imagining of Spartacus to associate him directly with Jesus. C. Osborne Ward, *The Ancient Lowly: A History of the Ancient Working People from the Earliest Known Period to the Adoption of Christianity by Constantine*, vol. 1 (1889; rpt. New York: Franklin, 1970), 329, did so and influenced Fast's novel. Gibbon's novel ends with the vision that one of Spartacus' close associates, dying on the cross, has of Spartacus and Jesus (immediately before the recurrence of its epigraph): "And he saw before him, gigantic, filling the sky, a great Cross with a figure that was crowned with thorns; and behind it, sky-towering as well, gladius [= sword] in hand, his hand on the edge of the morning behind that Cross, the figure of a Gladiator. And he saw that these Two were One, and the world yet theirs: and he went into unending night and left them that shining earth" (Gibbon, *Spartacus*, 210). A paragraph before, the dying man's last words ("O Spartacus!") are a cry *de profundis* and could imaginably be followed by "Why hast thou forsaken me?" Theresa Urbainczyk, *Spartacus* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2004), 107–109, briefly summarizes Gibbon's "Christ-figure" Spartacus. Cf. the death on the cross of the gladiator David, a figure of whom remnants remain in the film, in Fast, *Spartacus*, 246–251. Cf. further Richard G. Lillard, "Through the Disciplines with Spartacus: The Uses of a Hero in History and the Media," *American Studies*, 16 no. 2 (1975), 15–28, at 23, on Arthur Koestler's novel *The Gladiators* (1939): "The book ends with physical defeat but with the suggestion of a Jesus-like resurrection of the faith that Spartacus fought for." Cf. also a

his young son, born in freedom. "He's free, Spartacus, free!" says Varinia, who is also free. "He's free. He'll remember you, Spartacus, because I'll tell him. I'll tell him who his father was and what he dreamed of." We may remember the words of the narrator of *Quo Vadis*: "On a Roman cross in Judaea, a man died to make men free." Here, again on a Roman cross, a man is dying to make men free. Varinia's words may also remind us of "the old Negro spiritual" from which Martin Luther King quoted at the conclusion of his speech at the Lincoln Memorial: "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last." So it is appropriate that Spartacus on his cross utters only one word in reply to Varinia: "Free." *Consummatum est*: It is finished.[51]

Spartacus does not die in vain; his legacy will live. Earlier in the film we have already received two clear hints at the underlying concept of Spartacus' spiritual immortality, his quasi-resurrection from the dead. The survivors' resounding cry "I'm Spartacus!" tells us that even during his lifetime Spartacus has transcended the limitations of being only one person; he stands for, even has become, all of them. As such, his individual defeat and death are not decisive. In another scene, Spartacus himself expresses the idea of resurrection. After Crassus has forced him to kill his friend Antoninus, Spartacus conquers his conqueror: "Here's your victory!" Referring to Antoninus, he promises Crassus: "He'll come back. He'll come back, and he'll be millions!" His words anticipate the Civil-Rights struggle of the 1960s and especially Martin Luther King's march on Selma, Alabama, on which a recent commentator has written:

> King could have done nothing if poor and excluded blacks had not had the courage to shake off their servitude. The ones who joined the boycotts, the marches, the [voter] registration drives, did it at risk to their jobs, their property, their lives . . . It took great pride in themselves for the blacks to defy generations of repression . . . With this roll of martyrs in mind, it seems almost miraculous to watch . . . the nameless poor, heartbreakingly

recent novel, something of a curiosity, at whose beginning a conversation between God and Spartacus occurs, quoted here in a brief excerpt: "'My name is Spartacus.' . . . 'Spartacus? The gladiator? He of the slaves and the crucifixions? *You*?' 'No more strange than you being God.' 'But Spartacus is dead.' 'Not while one slave remains. Not while one man is subject to another . . .'" Shortly after this, God calls Spartacus "[t]he freedom fighter." Quoted from Christopher Leach, *God, Spartacus and Miss Emily* (London and Melbourne: Dent, 1987), 6. The titular lady is American poet Emily Dickinson. Symbolic survival after death is the figure for Spartacus: cf. Ghnassia, *Arena*, 295 ("'Spartacus is not dead'"), 298 ("'we would be betraying him now if we didn't carry on his fight, our fight for freedom . . . We're everywhere'" – an echo of "he'll be millions"), and 300 ("'Spartacus is not dead! Spartacus is not dead!'").

51 *John* 19.30.

> turned out in their best clothes, marching into danger, being hosed and herded and beaten – and, incredibly, coming back for more.[52]

To this we could add: and coming back in ever greater numbers. Spartacus also will come back.[53] Small wonder that Crassus is afraid of Spartacus dead even more than he had been of him alive: "I knew he could be beaten. But now I fear him." He has every reason to, even if Spartacus is not, as Crassus had surmised earlier, a god. His question to Varinia about the true nature of Spartacus is phrased in a way to evoke comparable questions about Jesus: "What sort of a man was he?"[54] Varinia's answer ("He was a simple man") fits both Jesus and Spartacus. Even the historical Spartacus had an aura of the supernatural and religious about him.[55] Before the final battle, Crassus had told his officers

52 Garry Wills, "An American Iliad." *The New York Review of Books* (April 6, 2006), 20, 22, and 24–26; quotation at 26 (in section entitled "Heroism"). This is a review essay on Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*.

53 The play *Les esclaves* (1853) by Edgar Quinet ends with Crassus' belief that Spartacus' son will be "another Spartacus" (*un autre Spartacus*). A comparable perspective appears in Urbain Gohier's *Spartacus* (1905): "This man's breath has passed on the earth . . . and liberty will be reborn" (*Le souffle de cet homme a passé sur la terre . . . et la liberté renaîtra*). Quoted from André Simon, "Esclaves romains et théâtre français," in *Spectacula*, vol. 1: *Gladiateurs et amphithéâtres*, ed. Claude Domergue, Christian Landes, and Jean-Marie Pailler (Lattes: Imago, 1990), 295–303; quotations at 301 and 302. The cinema, of course, has followed suit. Two films after Kubrick's are noteworthy in this regard: Sergio Corbucci's *Il figlio di Spartacus* (*Son of Spartacus* or *The Slave*, 1963), in which the titular hero is played by muscleman Steve Reeves, and Michele Lupo's *La vendetta di Spartacus* (*The Revenge of Spartacus*, 1965), in which Spartacus is believed to be still alive. At the end of an earlier film, Riccardo Freda's *Spartaco* (*Sins of Rome, Sins of Rome: Story of Spartacus, Spartacus the Gladiator*; 1953), Spartacus' unborn son embodies hope for a better future as well. Contrast the fate of Spartacus' son in Fast, *Spartacus*, 363, and the comments by Thomas Allen Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside a Film Artist's Maze*, 2nd edn. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 60, on the film's ending: "Kubrick . . . concludes the film with a composition that recalls the tragic irony of *Paths [of Glory]* . . . In Trumbo's version . . . the audience is encouraged to believe that she [Varinia] and Spartacus's child are traveling into a democratic future that will give value to his sacrifice. In Kubrick's version, one barely visible to this film's audience, they move into an indeterminate landscape where there exists only the certainty of death."

54 Cf. *John* 1.19–22. Such questions are likely to occur in films about mythic-historical heroes. An example from the time of *Spartacus* is Anthony Mann's *El Cid* (1961), in which Christ-like overtones, both visual and verbal ("Who are you?" or "What kind of man is this?"), characterize the protagonist throughout. On this film cf. my "Mythic and Cinematic Traditions in Anthony Mann's *El Cid*." *Mosaic*, 26 no. 3 (1993), 89–111. Mann, it will be remembered, was the original director of *Spartacus*.

55 Cf. the story about Spartacus and the snake prodigy reported in Plutarch, *Crassus* 8.2. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C.–70 B.C.*, 93, comments on this: "It indicates that Spartacus was thought to have been a figure who was surrounded by an aura of religiosity, insofar as *he* is portrayed here as the elect of supernatural forces." Cf. Bradley, 115: "the story in Plutarch suggests . . . the possibility at least that Spartacus saw himself and was seen as a mystical figure."

56 T. P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 201.

57 For background information on the address see Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., "President John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address, 1961," in *The Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents*, ed. Halford Ryan (Westport and London: Praeger, 1993), 181–193. Windt, 189, connects the speech to principles of classical oratory.

that his campaign was "to kill the legend of Spartacus." In this he was anything but victorious. So a modern historian's verdict is apposite: "For us, Spartacus is one of the most powerful of Roman myths."[56] The film itself is proof because it has told the story of Spartacus' passion to millions. It continues to do so.

6. Profiles in Courage

It will by now be evident that the hero of *Spartacus* is equally messianic and American. A speech given by one other famous American less than four months after the film's release shows that *Spartacus* was thoroughly in tune with the spirit of its time. The Inaugural Address by President John F. Kennedy, delivered on January 20, 1961, contains several statements and expressions that, with only minimal adjustments, could have come straight out of the mouth of Spartacus.[57] Kennedy himself called the occasion of his address "a celebration of freedom" in his opening sentence. With Kennedy, Spartacus could have proclaimed:

> Let every nation know . . . that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

As Spartacus exhorted his people to one final struggle for their freedom in his address on the mountainside, so Kennedy summoned his people to heed the call to a similar struggle. Kennedy is referring to the Cold War, a modern fight of freedom against oppression on a worldwide scale:

> Now the trumpet summons us again – not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are – but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation" – a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself . . . The energy,

> the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it – and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

The Spartacus of our film is an Everyman, as we have seen, and what he says on the screen to his people he says from the screen to all of us: "I do know that we're brothers, and I know that we're free." Spartacus could have addressed mankind in Kennedy's own terms: "My fellow citizens of the world: ask . . . what together we can do for the freedom of man."[58]

Freedom and civil rights were an important part of Kennedy's administration. Noteworthy in our context is his "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights" of June 11, 1963, prompted by Alabama governor George Wallace's order to block the admission of two black students to the University of Alabama. Kennedy sent in the National Guard and gave his address the same evening. Racial equality, he said, was "primarily . . . a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution."[59] That night Medgar Evers was killed in Mississippi. But even so, the era of the "drivers of negroes," as Samuel Johnson had called them, was beginning to come to a close.

On February 4, 1961, the second Friday night of Kennedy's presidency, Spartacus' and Kennedy's paths converged. Kennedy crossed the picket line of the American Legion outside a theater near the White House to attend a screening of *Spartacus*.[60] The Leader of the Free World was visiting its – and his – prophet.[61]

Like Spartacus, John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King were killed by evil forces. But all three conquered death and became mythical icons of just causes. Their souls keep marching on.

58 On Kennedy's speech see now Thurston Clarke, *Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech That Changed America* (New York: Holt, 2004; rpt. 2005).

59 Quoted from John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights," available at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum web site (http://www.jfklibrary.net/J061163.htm) as text and audio file.

60 Cf. "Kennedy Attends Movie in Capital," *The New York Times* (February 5, 1961), 39. This short news article also mentions that Kennedy's brother Robert, the Attorney General, had seen the film and recommended it to him; it further reports: "He . . . picked up a brochure 'Spartacus, the Rebel Against Rome' [*sic*], and put it in his pocket" and: "'It was fine,' the President told a reporter on his way out" about the film. Smith, "A Good Business Proposition'," 93, observes that the American Legion objected not to the content of *Spartacus* but only to "the political association of the person who wrote the film." On Kennedy and *Spartacus* cf. also Douglas, *The Ragman's Son*, 334. Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, 36, states that Kennedy's attendance was "the single most important endorsement" of *Spartacus*.

61 Cf. Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, 40–41 note 1, on Kennedy's belief that "history was the stuff of heroes."

CHAPTER TEN

Spartacus and the Stoic Ideal of Death

Francisco Javier Tovar Paz

Most critics have until now approached Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* from one of two perspectives, focusing either on the film's social and political aspects or on its cinematic nature. The former approach deals with the problems of racial discrimination and human rights as a modern sort of slavery in the United States, of Marxism in a capitalist society, and of militarization in the Cold War. The latter approach examines *Spartacus* as an epic film set in ancient Rome, its relationship to other such films, and as a new specimen among such films in which Spartacus the gladiator has become a political or religious figure. That is to say, unlike other spectacle films, *Spartacus* is elevated to the level of political significance.

These interpretations are valid but insufficient. For example, it is difficult to establish a relation of cause and effect between the social and political situation in the United States after World War II and the Rome depicted in the film. After all, Spartacus and his followers refuse to be Romans. They express no demand for Roman citizenship and its attendant rights. Instead, they desire to return to their home countries, which are presumably just as different from Rome as they are from the United States. The idea of freedom embodied by Spartacus does not coincide with the freedom that senator Gracchus, the film's old and wily politician, works for but fails to achieve. Spartacus' idea is of freedom intrinsic to all human beings. Gracchus' idea is of the *libera res*

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Martin M. Winkler

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