

HUI216

Italian Civilization

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10.1 *Spartacus* is a movie based on a 1951 novel by Howard Fast

- What Fast had to say in 2000 interview
 - I was imprisoned for contempt of Congress for refusing to "name names" to the House Un-American Affairs Committee.
 - This set me to thinking a great deal about prison, and when I was released, I began a very intense study of ancient slavery and imprisonment, particularly with a set of books (rare books today) called "The Ancient Lowly." [Cyrenus Osborne Ward, Charles H. Kerr & Company, Chicago. 1888. 2 vols.] In these books, extensive information on the Spartacus revolt was available. (from <http://trussel.com/hf/ancient.htm>)

10.2 The plot of the movie *Spartacus* (notes of John Barodin): Spartacus, the gladiatorial school

- *Spartacus* tells the story of a slave revolt led by the title character
- Initially, Spartacus was a slave in a Thracian slave camp where he is bought by Batiatus, who runs a gladiator school
- At the school, the men are taught how to fight but do not fight to the death, as this would be bad for the morale of the camp
- For good behavior, the gladiators are permitted the company of a woman. Spartacus is assigned a Britton, named Varinia, whom he treats with respect. As a result, a relationship forms between the two, and they soon fall in love.

10.2 The plot of *Spartacus*: Crassus, the revolt

- When Roman senator Crassus visits the school with his wife and another couple, the two women demand that four of the gladiators fight to the death. Although Spartacus is defeated in the fight, his opponent refuses to kill him and instead hurls a spear in Crassus's direction. The slave is immediately killed for his behavior.
- While at the school, Crassus buys Varinia from Batiatus, and, when Spartacus finds out, he is outraged and starts an uprising by the gladiators who eventually overrun the school
- With Spartacus as their leader, the escaped gladiators travel through southern Italy freeing other slaves who join their ranks. His plan is to leave Italy and return home with the help of pirates. It is while traveling through Italy that Spartacus reunites with Varinia, who also escaped. The two marry and Varinia is soon pregnant with Spartacus' baby.

10.2 The plot of *Spartacus*: Glabrus, Crassus

- The Roman senate dispatches a small Roman force, led by Glabrus, to deal with Spartacus. However, Spartacus gets word of this and attacks the Romans while they are sleeping and destroys the Roman force. Glabrus is freed to return to the senate, where he is forced to admit his incompetence in handling his forces. As a result, he is banished from Rome by Crassus, his political ally.
- Crassus, wanting to increase his political power by destroying Spartacus, convinces the senate to deploy a much larger army to deal with the slave army. However, this one is also destroyed, this time with more than 19,000 casualties.
- The senate, humiliated by the Roman army's inability to defeat slaves, deploys another army, this time led by Crassus himself.

10.2 The plot of *Spartacus*: defeat, crucifixions

- This army leaves from Rome, while another two armies are coming up from the south behind Spartacus.
- Seeing that he is trapped, he wills his troops north and into battle against the army led by Crassus. Spartacus and his army are defeated, and he is captured along with Varinia and their newborn son.
- Crassus, determined to find Spartacus, threatens the captured gladiators by saying that if Spartacus does not reveal himself, the prisoners will be executed. As Spartacus begins to admit his identity, hundreds of other slaves yell, "I am Spartacus!"
- With Spartacus' identity still hidden, Crassus demands that the 6,000 slaves be crucified on the road to Rome.

10.2 The plot of *Spartacus*: the ending

- In the walk back to Rome, Crassus recognizes Spartacus from the fight at the gladiator school and spares him so that he can entertain Crassus by fighting to the death in Rome. Spartacus wins the fight but is the last slave to be crucified and is nailed up to a cross just outside the gates to Rome.
- In the end, Varinia achieves her freedom and, while leaving Rome, sees Spartacus nailed up on a cross just outside the gates. She brings her newborn son to the dying gladiator, the first time Spartacus sees his son. She pleads with him to die and end his suffering, which he does as she rides off a free woman.

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: *Spartacus* (1960; dir. Stanley Kubrick)

- A peculiar feature of the big historical movies produced in Hollywood and dedicated to crucial events in the history of Rome is how little they look connected to Italy, and how much they seem to emphasize the disconnect between Roman history and Italian history
- In the case of *Spartacus*, for example, the only references to Italy in the entire movie seem to be the map of the Italian peninsula shown on the background during the scenes shot in Spartacus' tent, while his army of slaves is waiting for the Pirates to put together enough ships for them to escape from Italy

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: *Spartacus* and Italian geography

- With the exception of Rome, the few names of Italian cities that are quoted in the movie (Brindisi, for example) are quoted with their Latin names: a justifiable decision, in favor of historical accuracy (although, one wonders, why it does not apply to Rome itself), yet interestingly very different from the choice of a significant Italian counterpart such as *Scipione l'Africano*
- Even the places, the steep mountains and the open plains practically bare of any vegetation, add to the movie a generic imperial grandeur (the movie was shot in Spain, with the participation of soldiers from the Spanish army, at that time under the command of fascist dictator General Franco), a sense of greatness that is commonly associated with the very idea of an empire (be it the Roman Empire or the one in *Star Wars*)

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: *Spartacus* and the Roman empire

- Scenes shot in a natural setting alternate with others shot inside the residences of Roman senators in the city of Rome, characterized by generic interiors, where the idea of Roman civilization is simply conveyed by an abundance of marble and, once again, by the size of every hall and room. Practically no scenes are shot in the streets of Rome, instead.
- The Roman empire here does not fully represent a historical reality, it seems, rather it is transformed into an abstract political entity: even the widespread use of the term *empire*, instead of the technically more accurate term *republic*, reinforces that idea (the Latin term *imperium* meant domination, or the power of the government over a land)

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: Romans in *Spartacus*

- All the Romans that we see portrayed on the screen are either members of the Roman government (senators and soldiers), or are connected to it through a relationship marked by power and authority
 - E.g. Peter Ustinov's character, who provides slaves and gladiators for the entertainment of the wealthy and powerful Romans, and yet is always fearful and subject to the prevarication of those who represent the state.
- Everybody else in the movie is a servant or a slave.
- Average Romans are nowhere to be found.

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: the Roman senators in *Spartacus*

- The senators that we see on the screen are rather Machiavellian, constantly trying to outsmart each other with no care whatsoever for the idea of serving the state and the common interests of Roman society.
- The actors who play the part of senators (Lawrence Olivier is Crassus, and Charles Laughton is Graccus) with all probability would not have been cast to act as Italians in a movie on modern-day Italy.
 - They were chosen to play the part of Roman Senator simply because they were British, and with their British accent they evoked the might of the most recent empire in history, the British Empire

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: sex in *Spartacus*

- To contribute to the generic idea of an empire there are also hints to the "sexual decadence" of the Romans, going after female as well as male slaves
 - In a famous scene which was cut from the movie when it was released originally, Lawrence Olivier is bathing assisted by his personal slave Antoninus (Tony Curtis), and he enters into a dialogue about "snails and oysters" which is based on double entendres of a sexual nature.
 - That scene has been restored in the recently released DVD edition, and since the studios had lost the original audio tracks, Tony Curtis was called in to give voice to his character once again, while Anthony Hopkins replaced the voice of the deceased Lawrence Olivier.

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: greatness

- Connected to the theme of the "perversion of morals" presumed to be common in imperial societies is also the behavior displayed by the two women accompanying Crassus to see the gladiators in Capua
 - They are constantly giggling while they insist on having the men fight to the death for their entertainment, and without too many clothes on, allegedly to save them from the unbearable heat.
- "Greatness" is one of the keywords of the movie, which is repeated in many dialogues.
 - From the point of view of the mighty Romans, the question is: can there be greatness in a state that has adopted slavery?
 - From the point of view of the movie's hero, Spartacus, the question is: can one achieve greatness, having been born a slave?

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: the disconnect between Roman civilization and Italian history

- It is worthwhile to consider how the movie was presented in the original trailers, now included with bonus material inside the DVD. One says: "In the year 70 B.C. Rome, colossus of the world, faced its greatest challenge".
- In another Senator Crassus (Lawrence Olivier) is presented to the audience as "the symbol of Rome's power and might". The pitch describing the story in 25 words or less, as required, is the same in all trailers: "the powerful story of the gladiator rebel who sprang from slavery to challenge the awesome might of imperial Rome".
- The opening titles of the movie show a series of Greco-Roman statues, mostly heads, and the last one before the opening scene falls to pieces suggesting the idea of decadence, of a civilization nearing its tragic end.

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: the first scene of *Spartacus*

- While the camera moves from a Roman soldier on top of a wooden tower-post to a line of slaves carrying rocks over the mountains of the Roman province of Thracia, we hear these words solemnly spoken:
 - "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 coming of Christ and the spreading of Christian religion may certainly be what marks the actual difference between the Roman world and Italy or the modern world in general. Still...

10.3 Hollywood's Rome: ethnicity in *Spartacus*

- In *Spartacus* there is a Spanish gladiator, there is an English slave (years before the Romans actually conquered England!), and the protagonist is a Thracian
- Only Italy is missing from the picture, with the exception of the fact that Spartacus' friend Antoninus once, when interrogated, says that he is a Sicilian
- It is easy to notice that he is physically smaller and less muscular than most other characters, and in the story his special talents are singing and recitation of poems!

10.4 The plot of the movie *Gladiator* (notes of John Barodin): Maximus the soldier vs. Commodus the son of the Emperor

- "Gladiator" details the fall of the great Roman general Maximus, who after learning that he will be succeeding Marcus Aurelius as emperor of the Roman Empire, is deceived by Aurelius's son Commodus
- Although Maximus wants nothing to do with assuming the throne, he accepts so that he can right the wrongs of the current Empire
- Commodus, outraged by the fact that his father would give the throne to someone other than he, deceives Maximus and sends him to be executed
- However, Maximus escapes and returns home to find his wife and son dead
- Distraught by this, Maximus flees and is eventually captured and sold into slavery, where he becomes a gladiator

10.4 The plot of *Gladiator*: Maximus the gladiator

- Fighting not for the crowd's satisfaction but for survival, Maximus and the other gladiators bond together and soon become a crowd favorite
- Maximus' band of gladiators eventually fight at the Colosseum where Emperor Commodus is a spectator
- Commodus, impressed by the passion and skill with which Maximus fights, makes his way to the Colosseum floor after the battle to meet the impressive gladiator
- Commodus demands Maximus helmet be removed to show his face, and Maximus' identity is revealed
- Commodus, thinking his rival was murdered long ago, is outraged to see Maximus alive and immediately schemes to have him eliminated

10.4 The plot of *Gladiator*: the final fight

- However, the task is more difficult than it seems, as Maximus has quickly become popular and thousands of people flock to the Colosseum to see him fight
- Commodus, jealous of the popularity Maximus has attained, arranges for a battle between himself and Maximus, hoping to win over the crowd
- However, Commodus knows he is no match for the gladiator in the arena. As a result, he wounds Maximus before the battle and conceals the wound under his armor
- The two Romans battle until Maximus, near death, defeats Commodus and fatally stabs him, not long before he too succumbs to death

10.5 Hollywood's Rome: *Gladiator* (2000; dir. Ridley Scott)

- What I said about *Spartacus*, can be repeated about *Gladiator*
- Even in this movie the idea of the Empire translates into the generic political ambitions of a few individuals
 - No relevant mention of the systems that govern the administration of a large state
 - On screen are the political maneuvers of scheming senators and Machiavellian members of the imperial family
- Sexual deviance is also brought forth to reinforce the idea of the decadence of the Roman empire
 - Commodus and his sister Lucilla have an incestuous relationship, which is consummated at the end of the movie
 - Commodus is portrayed as a sadist in a very crude, almost grotesque way (see how Joaquin Phoenix jumps around and sticks his tongue out at the sight of blood during the gladiatorial games in the Colosseum, or how he looks at his sister's son Lucius)

10.5 Hollywood's Rome: *Gladiator* and the greatness of Rome

- Central to the thematic development of this movie is the "idea," the "vision" of the idealistic "greatness of Rome," better characterized by the Shakespearean motto "there was once a dream that was Rome"
- The idealist Maximus attempts to "give power back to the people of Rome and end the corruption that has crippled it" (in the words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius to the film's good guy, Maximus)
- Rome has nothing to do with Italian civilization, it seems, and it simply serves as the pretext for a story about the fight of a good man to insure democracy, equality, justice for all, and also to protect his family
- "Is Rome worth one good man's life?" says Lucilla at the end of the movie, right before Juba, the Numidian gladiator and friend of Maximus leaves Rome to go home

10.5 Hollywood's Rome: *Gladiator* and Italy

- Maximus has left his family in Spain, almost three years before the story begins, and the only noticeable reference to Italy in this movie comes out when we see his wife and his child hoping to see him among the Roman soldiers that come to kill him and his mother (the evil pretorians, properly sporting all-black uniforms)
 - In the scene, the kid says: "Mamma, i soldati!" (=mammy, the soldiers), and then calls out "Papà!" (=daddy)
 - At another point in the movie, a street hawker in Rome shouts "Vino! Vino!" (= Wine! Wine!)
- In the end even this historic fiction ends up being mostly a moral tale about those staples of the American way of life that are individualism and self-development, how one individual can make a difference in his/her life and in the lives of many others...

10.5 Hollywood's Rome: *Gladiator* and ambition, progress

- ...as it becomes clear when we consider lines such as the following:
 - "the general who became a slave, the slave who became a gladiator, the gladiator who defied an Emperor..."
 - "today I saw a slave become more powerful than the Emperor of Rome" (these words are pronounced by Lucilla, Commodus' sister, after Maximus fights in the Colosseum for the first time)
 - Maximus replies back to her that the only power he has is "the power to amuse a mob," but Lucilla insists that "Rome is the mob" (which looks like an auto-ironic allusion to the power of the entertainment industry: to be able to entertain the masses is in itself power)