

*SCREENING THE*  
**male**

*EXPLORING MASCULINITIES  
IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA*



*EDITED BY*

**steven cohan  
& ina rae hark**

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Exploring masculinities in Hollywood cinema

Edited by

*Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark*



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## ANIMALS OR ROMANS

### Looking at masculinity in *Spartacus*

*Ina Rae Hark*

When Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' detailed how the cinematic apparatus and the conditions of cinema spectatorship invariably place woman as an object of the desiring male gaze, required to present herself as spectacle, its argument did not necessarily exclude the possibility that the apparatus could similarly objectify men who symbolically if not biologically lacked the signifying phallus. Although those who have built upon Mulvey's landmark work have overwhelmingly concentrated on the construction of the male viewing subject and the female spectacle, male spectacles, as the essays in this book demonstrate, abound in films. They surface especially in narratives and genres that feature power struggles between men.

If the structures of gender difference underwrite the economics of spectacularization, these practices nevertheless replicate themselves in many systems that operate through the empowerment of one group by the subjection of another. As Susanne Kappeler notes: 'Gender... lends a powerful cultural metaphor to oppression, as the working class becomes the object to the economic subject, becomes objectified, "feminized," animalized, commodified' (Kappeler 1986:70). Looking at bodies, regardless of their gender, marks a principal form of control exercised in the discourses of institutional power that Michel Foucault has traced. In these systems where political control or subjugation intersect psychoanalytic models of subjectivity or lack, a male may very well find himself situated in positions analogous to those of the fetish or object of punishing voyeurism Mulvey describes as woman's in cinema's classic scopic regime.

The numerous film genres that focus on men in conflict with other men—Westerns, epics, swashbucklers, science fiction, sword and sorcery, war dramas, gangster and cop movies—often contain episodes in which a male protagonist's enemies make a spectacle of him. Extreme forms of this display occur in the appropriately named spectacular, where the genre's cultural settings (biblical, Greco-Roman) allow for both male and female fashions that reveal considerable flesh; moreover, in these cultures

homoerotic practices are widely acknowledged and the punishment of criminals or conquered foes is a highly elaborated public show, allowing for the ample spectacularization of male characters. Most frequently this spectacle is sado-masochistic, enacted through beating or torture, during which the male body, marked by the punishment, is eroticized through stripping or binding.

This is not to say that such films present the spectacularized male as transparently as the female. By contrast, they frequently code such spectacles as unnatural, in contrast to those of women, which transpire unremarked within the diegesis. Males played by movie stars become spectacularized or commodified, these narratives assert, only because the rightful exercise of masculine power has been perverted by unmanly tyrants. From Robin Hood to Rambo, captive or outlawed men revolt because the powerful subject positions within their societies have been usurped by male oppressors who don't qualify for them. (Hollywood ideology works to efface any suggestion that true masculinity could express itself undemocratically.) Thus, the usurpers often display characteristics not marked as signifiers of masculinity in the codes of male film performance at the time. They may for example be effete, overweight, short, foreign-accented, or disabled. The narrative trajectory in such films most often traces the male star-protagonist's liberation from his subjugated position to effect the restoration of appropriate patriarchal authority and the removal of the male-impersonator from power. In *Captain Blood* (1935), for example, Errol Flynn's Dr Peter Blood progresses from convicted traitor to enslaved laborer on the plantation of the Governor of Jamaica/the porcine Lionel Atwill to commander of a buccaneer ship to Atwill's successor as the new governor and husband to his niece (and Blood's former owner) Arabella.

Yet these narratives pose two uneasy questions. If the natural male position in patriarchy is to command the gaze, initiate exchanges, and articulate the law of the father, how do so many men whose masculinity is not fully constructed on-screen gain possession of these positions? And if patriarchy and capitalism in the wrong hands operate so oppressively, who is to say that the mere insertion of the 'correct' movie-star male icon into these systems will erase all oppression?

*Spartacus*, the epic about a gladiators' revolt against Rome in 73 BC, released in 1960 at the end of a decade of spectacular box office success for beefcake on display, provides an especially productive text through which to examine these questions. Its protagonist emerges from a system of institutionalized slavery—class difference at its most extreme—that, the film is at pains to articulate, deliberately excludes enslaved men from the subject positions granted their gender in the scopic and economic regimes of patriarchy. The experience of Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) as a gladiator combines marks of hypermasculinity—the training sequences feature

enough phallic weaponry to send Freudians into sensory overload —with the feminine requirements to offer himself up as spectacle and acquiesce in the ultimate passivity demanded by his masters: ‘Those who are about to die salute you.’<sup>1</sup> More importantly, the plot of *Spartacus* does not complete the ‘natural’ ascendancy of the oppressed male star into the usurper’s place. While his revolt reaches the outlaw stage, he does not, like Captain Blood or Robin Hood, attain eventual reintegration into the power structure. His army is defeated and every man in it killed. Spartacus, who began the film condemned to starvation while chained to a cliff face, ends it crucified, a not dissimilar type of execution-as-spectacle. With the material failure of his struggle actually helping Crassus (Laurence Olivier) to cement his dictatorial sway over Rome, the signifying power of Spartacus’s achievements in the interval of reprieve from this grisly destiny inevitably comes under scrutiny, in a way it would not had he escaped to become King of Thrace or marched starry-eyed into Christian martyrdom as do Marcellus and Diana in *The Robe* (1953).

With its masculine ego-ideal unable to retain his subjectivity within patriarchy, the film cannot fully recuperate patriarchal masculinity, despite the efforts of its second half to do so. Instead it reveals, without resolving, a dilemma of masculine subjectivity constantly shifting axes between material force and signifying practices, between sexual and class differences; ultimately the men in the film are caught between two unsatisfactory models of male power, which Spartacus distinguishes as ‘animal’ and ‘Roman.’ And every time the film answers the question, ‘Can we define a human subjectivity independent of another’s subjection?’ affirmatively, sites of textual rupture whisper, ‘Not here, not now.’

### SITE OF SPECTACLE: THE ENSLAVED MALE

The first hour of *Spartacus*, which ends with the gladiators’ revolt, rigorously details the spectacularization of the enslaved male and the systematic suppression of any move on his part to achieve subjectivity through mastery of the gaze. The gladiator is selected, groomed, and trained for the sole purpose of providing a worthy spectacle for ‘ladies and gentlemen of quality who appreciate a fine kill.’ The suitability of his body, both athletically and aesthetically, is the crucial criterion. Shopping in Libya, Batiatus (Peter Ustinov), slave dealer and proprietor of the gladiatorial school in Capua, rejects men whose rotten teeth signify bones like chalk and men who as Gauls are disposed to be disagreeably ‘hairy.’

Once enrolled at the gladiatorial school, the slaves undergo bodily transformations. Batiatus encourages them with details of the more pleasurable aspects of this ritualistic eroticizing of their bodies: ‘A gladiator is like a stallion. He must be pampered. You’ll be bathed, oiled,

shaved, massaged, taught to use your heads. A good body with a dull brain is as cheap as life itself. You'll be given your ceremonial kowdahs—be proud of them...From time to time those of you who please me will be given the companionship of a young lady.'

The stallion simile encapsulates many of the contradictions the film assigns to its protagonist as enslaved male. It inaugurates the animal/human binary that he will invoke repeatedly to distinguish slave from free existence. However, in that a prize horse passively receives pampering and decoration—Batiatus tactfully omits reference to his pupils being branded like horses—so that empowered spectators may admire it, the stallion signifies less brute animality than femininity.<sup>2</sup> This becomes explicit when Claudia (Nina Foch) and Helena (Joanna Barnes) select the pairs they wish to fight to the death for their entertainment; the sequence serves as a parodic reversal of the many movie scenes in which a group of men ogle dancing girls, strip-tease artists, or other women on display. Motivated entirely by the amount of erotic stimulation a given body promises, the two 'capricious, over-painted nymphs' (as Batiatus later describes them) make their choices in near-orgasmic whispers after languorous gazings at the candidates. Helena insists on Draba (Woody Strode) because 'I want the most beautiful. Give me the big, black one.' Then she asks that the men be spared their 'suffocating tunics' and clothed only in enough 'for modesty.'

The stallion speech reveals Batiatus's insight that no slave would go through the grueling gladiatorial training if he clearly perceived himself as nothing more than a spectacle for Romans' desiring gaze. Indeed, the chronicler Appian of Alexandria speculated that the historical Spartacus 'persuaded about seventy [gladiators] to gamble for their freedom rather than be put on show at a public spectacle' (Bradley 1989:98). So Batiatus tempts his recruits with the opportunity for male subjectivity. They will not be solely material good bodies with dull brains, 'cheap' bimbos; they will also be 'men'—stallions rather than fillies or geldings. They can have pride in the tiny pony-tail of the phallic kowdah; they can wield weapons; the most pleasing can have women. By transferring the term 'lady' from the Romans who will buy and watch the gladiators to the female slaves over whom alone they may be permitted mastery, Batiatus hopes to efface the humiliation of the enslaved male forced to make a spectacle of himself.

The promised subjectivity is, of course, a sham. The gladiators may use their weapons only on each other, with their masters dictating the choice of opponent. When Steve Neale groups the gladiatorial bout in *Spartacus* with other epic contests like the chariot race in *Ben Hur* (1959) as examples of male combat that 'are moments of spectacle...but they are also points at which the drama is finally resolved,' he overlooks the fact that Spartacus and Draba are fighting for nothing, except the titillation of

spectators for whom there is definitely not the intention 'to disavow any explicitly erotic look at the male body' (Neale 1983:14). The gladiators have no score to settle, as did Judah Ben-Hur and Messala; their combat has no narrative point for them.

Nor would their masters permit a fight that did. When the sadistic trainer Marcellus (Charles McGraw) hands Spartacus a sword and tries to goad him into striking, Spartacus knows that to wield it of his own volition would be fatal—his previous lashing out at Roman authority earned him a death sentence—and demurs. This indicates to Marcellus that Spartacus may have intelligence, a quality that, in direct contradiction to Batiatus's assertion, he proclaims 'dangerous for slaves.' The trainer promises, 'Everything you do, I'll be watching.'

As a corollary to this constant surveillance, entry into the symbolic order through language is prohibited. The gladiators are quartered in solitary cells, with talking forbidden in their communal areas. In the first hour of the film, Kirk Douglas speaks only twenty-one lines, all but one of them a phrase or sentence of six words or less. Spartacus's only power in relation to language is a negative one, to withhold speech when Romans demand it of him. Such a refusal to answer shakes Crassus from his icy detachment when he confronts Spartacus after the suppression of the revolt; metonymically prefiguring that moment is the condemned Spartacus's refusal to open his mouth on command so that Batiatus can poke his teeth, with which he has just hamstrung the guard.

Most problematic for the masculinity promised the gladiator, even his mastery of his female counterpart is subject to spectacularization. The key sequence occurs when Batiatus sends Varinia (Jean Simmons) to Spartacus's cell. Spartacus arrests her progress to his cot to touch her skin and hair, to pull down one sleeve of her dress to admire her naked shoulder, to tell her he has 'never had a woman before.' She disrobes, resignedly offering her body to his gaze and subsequent penetration. But Spartacus craves physical satisfaction far less than the entry into desire. Varinia is a mysterious object upon whom he looks with unabashed erotic pleasure. This entry into desiring subjectivity Rome cannot allow. Spartacus is already marked as a troublemaker in the first basic-training session when he looks Marcellus fiercely in the eye rather than lowering his gaze as the other slaves do.

Therefore Batiatus and Marcellus, voyeuristically spying on the proceedings through the barred ceiling, urge him to do something more than just look. The irony, that Batiatus and Marcellus, with a houseful of women (and men) at their disposal, would also rather look than rape, is precisely the point. The power of the gaze supersedes the power of the penis that is not a phallus. The scene represents a defining moment as to the meaning the film attributes to spectacle for Romans. The permission to become a spectator demarcates the master from the slave. Rome



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*Figure 19* Peter Ustinov and Charles McGraw

maintains and enforces its power through making spectacles of those it dominates. Just as, in psychoanalytic terms, the woman's body must become the phallus to assuage the threat posed by her failure to possess the phallus, so the gladiator must embody the very material domination that controls him in order to ease the threat to Roman mastery a slave's lack of self-determination signifies. Thus, forcing slaves to engage in phallic aggression against one another—in the arena or the bedroom—while Rome watches becomes homologous with a male making a fetishistic spectacle of woman. Spartacus's transgression here, as it is Draba's in the gladiatorial contest (also accompanied by tittering sexual innuendo from the spectators), is to refuse to penetrate a fellow slave for his master's visual/erotic pleasures.

Spartacus feels that to couple for pure physical stimulation, denied one's own subjectivity, while knowingly the object of another's detached gaze, robs the slave of humanity; 'Go away, I'm not an animal,' he shouts. When he repeats the claim to Varinia, she replies, 'Neither am I.' Objecting to his own spectacularization, Spartacus has not realized that he is in fact taking the Roman position in regard to Varinia. Throughout the film, the dangers of escaping the animal's objectification only to indulge in the Roman's passion for objectifying others haunt Spartacus's struggles

to claim subjectivity for himself. The realm of sexual difference offers the most 'natural' place for such Romanization to occur. But Varinia's rebuke causes Spartacus immediately to disavow masculine tyranny. Relinquishing the gaze, he returns her dress, averts his eyes while she puts it on, and asks her name.

At this point, as signification is beginning for both slaves, Batiatus must intervene. Removing Varinia from the cell, he chides: 'You may not be an animal Spartacus, but this sorry show gives me very little hope that you will ever be a man.' Rome's hegemony would fall should its slaves inscribe themselves in a symbolic order. So it is necessary that male slaves acknowledge the primacy of material force over the desiring gaze. Throughout his confinement at Capua, Spartacus never gives up his mute courtship of Varinia through a mutual exchange of glances; the Romans never give up defining these yearning looks as marks of Spartacus's lack of manhood. In the scene in which Marcellus displays the slave's semi-naked body, slathered with different colors of paint to illustrate the consequences of variously placed sword thrusts. Marcellus catches Spartacus turning his head to gaze at Varinia. Rather than insist that Spartacus refrain from looking, he physically restrains him from abandoning the gaze: 'Since all you can do is look at girls, go ahead and look, slave.' A being forced to present his body for such passive display, Marcellus implies, can never gain power through the gaze. Such psychological attempts to castrate the gaze of the enslaved male complement the Romans' spectacularization of his body.

Yet spectacles offer little pleasure in *Spartacus*. Gazes are marked by their impotence, by a subjectivity whose object eludes it. Few point of view shots share the perspective of the voyeuristic Roman masters. What lingers in the mind are the glamour-lighted close-ups of characters in a state of despairing, unachievable desire, often staring into an empty quadrant of the wide-screen frame. A number of these shots feature Jean Simmons, appearing to offer her directly to the male spectator's erotic gaze, but even more present Douglas in this manner, and not a few Olivier. The visual style underlines the futility of the look rather than the erotic pleasure of looking, a notable instance being the intercut shots of Spartacus on the cross and Varinia in the cart straining to fix each other in their respective gazes while distance and death hurry them apart.

The film underscores its emphasis on troubled looks by frustrating the visual pleasures of the audience. For a wide-screen spectacular with a cast of thousands, it presents relatively few panoramic vistas or much visual excess: '...it is free of Christian martyrs being eaten by lions, has no chariot races, lacks the customary orgies in which dusky, semi nude girls cram grapes into their mouths as fat, Roman nobles eye them lasciviously' (Alpert 1960:32).

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*Figure 20* Kirk Douglas and Charles McGraw

Spectacle becomes troubled within the diegesis because the spectacularized bodies repeatedly resist their assigned roles. Spectators can therefore assure themselves untroubled looking only when they have the body under stringent material control, when they stage a ‘spectacle of the scaffold,’ starring ‘the body of the condemned’ (Foucault 1977:32; 3). ‘The public execution is to be understood not only as a judicial, but also as a political ritual,’ Foucault continues. ‘It belongs, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested’ (Foucault 1977:47). On three occasions in *Spartacus* Romans sentence rebellious slaves to death and display their bodies. For hamstringing the guard, Spartacus, stripped to a loincloth and riveted to a rock, is to be starved in full view of his fellows. After Draba’s death during his attack on Crassus and his party, Marcellus hangs his body upside down at the entrance to the gladiators’ cells ‘until he rots.’ The gladiators’ uprising itself of course constitutes the most elaborate revolt and subsequent spectacular punishment the film portrays.

Prepared for the afternoon before, when Draba turned his weapon on the spectators instead of his defeated opponent, it occurs spontaneously at the moment Marcellus once again mocks Spartacus’s gaze, telling him to take a ‘last look’ at the departing Varinia and reminding him of his lack

of access to language—‘no talking in the kitchen, slave’—as Spartacus speaks his dismay. But the slave army’s temporary success only makes its eventual subjugation the more terrible. Crassus promises the Roman citizenry ‘the living body of Spartacus for whatever punishment you deem fit, this or his head.’ He eventually lines the Appian way with the crucified bodies of Spartacus and six thousand of his followers. As Foucault observes: ‘Justice pursues the body beyond all possible pain’ (Foucault 1977:34).

### ‘I’M SPARTACUS’: THE TRAP OF MALE SUBJECTIVITY

Spectacular displays of criminals even after they become corpses represent the body’s translation from the material realm to that of signification. *Spartacus* also attempts to write the body out of its discourse, setting up a contrast between materiality and signification that will transform the rotting corpses of its male heroes into an eternal principle of brotherhood and freedom. The Saul Bass titles design, in which the credits appear over fragmented body parts from Roman statuary and inscriptions from Latin tablets, foregrounds this binary at the outset. As I will subsequently argue, this strategy derails because of a number of internal contradictions, primarily generated by a mismatch between the more than usually detailed and complex psychologies of the principal male characters, in what screenwriter Dalton Trumbo called ‘this remarkably unstable script’ (Manfull 1970:521), and the narrative, ideological, and star functions the film requires them to fulfill.

Before considering what ruptures it in the two hours that comprise the uprising and its consequences, let me detail the ideological framework *Spartacus* intends to construct. The film announces its terms, already implicit in what has gone before, when Spartacus discovers Crixus and the others forcing two Romans they have captured to fight to the death. First contemptuously addressing the captives, ‘Noble Romans! fighting each other like animals,’ Spartacus then turns on his comrades: ‘What are we becoming—Romans?’ This is the crux. How does one escape animality, the purely material form of existence imposed upon the gladiators that constructed their masculinity in terms of bodily force and aggressive penetration, without becoming Roman, transcending materiality only by entrance into a system of desire and signification propped up by the objectification and oppression of the Other?

Spartacus invokes Draba as the model upon which to build a masculinity that is neither animal or Roman: ‘I swore that if I ever got out of this place, I’d die before I watched two men fight to the death again. Draba made that promise, too. He kept it. So will I.’ Here Spartacus echoes the film’s preceding depiction of Romanness as participation in coercive spectatorship. However, in doing so, he mistakes

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*Figure 21* Kirk Douglas and Woody Strode

the nature of Draba's revolt. Draba made no statement about watching men kill; he vowed not to kill on another's command. Yet he could not maintain his choice to renounce phallic aggression; he could only redirect that aggression toward his masters, a move that brought his death at Crassus's hands, precisely the trajectory that the gladiators' revolt itself traces. To be truly free the slaves must both liberate themselves from spectacularization and gain the option to forswear the sword. Neither Rome nor Hollywood is ready for that.

David Denby notes in his review of the restored *Spartacus* re-release that when Draba turns his trident on the Romans 'the weapon comes flying at the camera—a real shock' (Denby 1991:96). The shock is one of

recognition; for movie audiences go to spectacles to see what the Romans at Capua have demanded: athletic men fighting and killing each other, taking brief respites for lovemaking. Masculine ego-ideal stars like Kirk Douglas devote their careers to making spectacles of themselves for the entertainment of suspiciously Roman-like moviegoers.<sup>3</sup> And what kind of ego-ideal would Spartacus be if audiences didn't finally get to enjoy his repeated phallic mastery?

Consequently the sequences that portray the liberated slave encampment reveal that the gladiators spend their time doing the same things they did while enslaved. They use the training methods they learned to put recruits for Spartacus's army through their paces. After the waves of Roman legions come forth to challenge them, they are locked in a recurrent cycle of combat, much as they were at Capua. To be sure, these sequences replace the claustrophobic, walled and barred *mise-en-scène* of the gladiator school with mountain exteriors, the fragmented, taut montage with more fluid camera movements at wider angles, to imply that the slaves' former lives were repressively dehumanized only because of Roman control and spectacularization. To be an animal running free in the hills is indeed preferable to being an animal pulling a plow or displayed in a circus; but it is not to cease being an animal. Spartacus rightly intuits that the slaves' material activities must become linked to signifying practices if they are to transcend animality (or human narcissism). He therefore has urged them to act not as a 'gang of drunken raiders' but as an 'army of gladiators,' harnessing phallic aggression to the ideas of freedom, brotherhood, and home.

The problematic for Spartacus and his soldiers is to enter into signification without partaking of the tyranny subjectivity often authorizes. The film disingenuously elides the process by which the slaves amass a looted fortune of 50 million sesterces in order to buy transportation out of the country, only to be foiled by the far more practiced capitalistic machinations of Crassus. Not elided, however, is the establishment of conventional patriarchal gender relations between Spartacus and Varinia once they are free to become lovers—or as Varinia insists to Crassus with bourgeois prudishness, husband and wife. The Varinia Spartacus first encountered did not follow the Hollywood norm. Director Stanley Kubrick told his old employers, *Look* magazine: 'The way the scene was originally written, she was the typical movie heroine. She fought for her virtue; she beat her little fists against his chest and behaved in a cliché movie fashion. But when I did the scene, I realized that obviously she wasn't inexperienced—even if she was the heroine of the movie. It would be false for her to act this way' ('Spartacus' *Look* 1960:88).

Once freed, however, Varinia quickly becomes that typical movie heroine.<sup>4</sup> At the moment they are celebrating their mutual attainment of liberation from others' control of their lives ('No one can ever sell you,

or give you away'), she makes Spartacus her new master: 'Forbid me ever to leave you.' She casts herself as his adoring helpmeet, serving dinner and wine to his rowdy lieutenants, assuring him his weaknesses are strengths, swimming nude while he admires her from concealment, bearing the son—Spartacus never entertains any other possibility than that their baby will be a boy—whom she dubs her only reason for living once Spartacus is captured and killed. Batiatus's description of her to Gracchus (Charles Laughton) sums up this inconsistency: 'Proud, yes. The more chains you put on her, the less like a slave she looks. You feel she would surrender to the right man, which is irritating.' Varinia, then, anchors the typical recuperation of patriarchy in films of this genre through the 'right men' who star in them.

Such operations are so familiar that they might pass unnoticed if not for several sites of rupture within the text. First, characters from time to time admonish Spartacus for becoming too enamored of masculine subjectivity and phallic aggression. When he complains that a group of new converts to the rebellion contains 'too many women,' a feisty grandmother asks him where he would be if 'some woman hadn't fought all the pains of hell' to bring him into the world. His attempt to imprison the bird Antoninus's magic trick would release leaves him literally with egg all over his face.

Secondly, although typecast by both Rome and Hollywood in the role of narcissistic, phallic aggressor,<sup>5</sup> Spartacus from the beginning—if not consistently—distrusts such masculine power and gropes for a means to transcend it. Having slaved in the brutal, all-male world of the Libyan mines since before his thirteenth birthday has led him to conclude that the exercise of male sexuality may hurt women. (Unspeakable in a Hollywood film of this era, but hardly unimaginable, a violation of the young Spartacus by Roman guards or older slaves in the mines might explain this conclusion. Varinia was also first enslaved at thirteen, and the parallel may be drawn to suggest that on this cusp of puberty both became available to Roman rape.) Taunted with the knowledge that Varinia has been given to 'the Spaniard,' he whispers to her the next morning, 'Did he hurt you?' Subsequently he repeats that question when she announces her pregnancy in the midst of their love-play and when their son kicks in the womb. His sexist tone aside, Denby quite rightly points out that Spartacus 'treats his woman, Varinia...with so much respect that she urges him to get a little rougher' (Denby 1991:95).

Spartacus eventually recognizes that although gaining the ability to employ phallic power for his own ends rather than a Roman's may grant him male subjectivity, this subjectivity is still an animal's. His awareness crystallizes when Antoninus (Tony Curtis) joins the rebels. Antoninus's 'work' as singer of songs and performer of magic tricks at first draws Spartacus's mockery, but soon he is urging the poet to abandon his desire

to be trained as a soldier ('He wants to fight. An animal can learn to fight'); instead 'You won't learn to kill; you'll teach us songs.' The shift of Spartacus's primary male bond from the aggressive Crixus (who, unlike Draba, killed his opponent in the Capuan arena and 'always wanted to march on Rome') to the intellectual/poet Antoninus signals his dissatisfaction with a masculinity predicated on brute mastery alone.

Spartacus, then, yearns for a subjectivity beyond narcissism. He confesses his discomfort at his imperfect access to language—'I can't even read'—and lack of abstract knowledge about the natural world. Even sleeping beside the woman he loves 'more than my life,' Spartacus feels so alone that he must 'imagine a god for slaves.' Resisting the oppressive patriarchy of the Roman symbolic order, hoping one day to abjure phallic aggression, he still desires entry into some symbolic system. Can such a system exist without deriving from difference and thereby producing subjection? (Is there a non-phallic human subjectivity?) Can it avoid the total effacement of the material body, the production of subjects who function in a realm of sterile contempt for physical life, who accept too readily the suffering and death of real bodies in pursuit of a transcendental signifier? Can Spartacus vie with the Romans on the level of signification without becoming a Spartacan?

Here *Spartacus* encounters its most stubborn internal contradictions. As its generic conventions dictate, it parallels Spartacus's 'healthy' exercise of male subjectivity with the perverse tyranny of the Romans. He, like Crassus and Marcellus, tends to ask a person's name at once. For him it is a 'friendly question,' a granting of reciprocal signifying power, while for the Romans, demanding a slave's name is a demand that he surrender that power. The cross-cutting between Spartacus addressing his followers and Crassus addressing the citizens of Rome is meant to illustrate the same contrast. Yet parallels tend to conflate as well as contrast, planting a seed of doubt that a Spartacus who mastered the symbolic order might evolve into no more than another Crassus. That history allows Spartacus to triumph only in the arena of signification further muddies the waters.

Films with a rebel/outlaw hero confronting a tyrannous political regime frequently utilize the split Neale notes in the contradiction, for cinematic constructions of masculinity, 'between narcissism and the Law, between an image of *narcissistic* authority on the one hand and an image of *social* authority on the other' (Neale 1983:9). The narcissistic ego-ideal, given more to action than words, undermines the tyrant's hold on political power through physical rebellion until a proper enunciator of the law of the father can replace him. Thus King Richard's return 'relieves' Robin Hood; the Glorious Revolution deposes King James and allows Captain Blood to serve England lawfully under King William. In the religious epic, while the male protagonist defies the tyrant, God or Christ redeems his struggle by supplanting the tyrant's pagan deities. Spartacus, however,



must pull double duty, play Christ as well as Ben-Hur. The private, inarticulate Spartacus of the Capua scenes is joined by a public Spartacus who initiates the discourse of home, freedom, and brotherhood meant to define a symbolic that will supplant Rome's.<sup>6</sup> These two roles don't easily co-exist. Hollis Alpert observes that, since Kirk Douglas's scenes contain 'remarkably little talking,'

It comes as something of a shock, then, when Spartacus finally speaks out for freedom and makes the point that it was worth fighting for. This doctrine was undoubtedly subversive at the time, even if it does seem like a truism now. But that is the message of the picture, and Spartacus is stuck with it.

(Alpert 1960:32)

Not only does it strain the film to reconcile these two roles for Spartacus, but neither is unproblematic in isolation. As we have seen, narcissistic power does not suffice the private Spartacus; it pulls him back into the animal. Furthermore the disavowal of the phallus as signifier of masculinity threatens to collapse gender difference and inflect slave brotherhood with the homoeroticism, implicit in the genre, that suffuses the film and is its primary site of textual anxiety. Spartacus may find in Antoninus a paradigm for an alternative masculinity, but Antoninus, well aware that his work as performer-on-view rather than soldier, coupled with his pretty-boy looks, codes him as feminine, a stimulus to Crassus's appetite for 'snails,' insists on his access to just the kind of phallic mastery Spartacus wishes to abandon.<sup>7</sup>

The realm of signification into which the public Spartacus inscribes his followers is caught in the paradox Alpert notes. A banal 'truism' for the 1960 American audience the film text addresses, it is an anachronism for Spartacus, who lived a century before Christ and two thousand years before American democracy.<sup>8</sup> Eventually he did himself become the signifier that authorizes his discourse, a signifier of the revolutionary Other whose vitality the very existence of *Spartacus* itself confirms. Unlike the successful slave liberator, DeMille's Moses, who receives God's Law from burning bushes and mountaintops, who can keep his hands free of blood while Yahweh takes care of the smiting, Spartacus must improvise a god for slaves who offers no divine intervention that would allow him to abandon phallic aggression while retaining his freedom.

In contrast to Spartacus, who masters neither materiality nor signification without misgivings, stands Crassus, the central figure of the last two-thirds of the film, in which the slave revolt becomes just one element of the struggle between patrician dictatorship and plebeian republicanism to define the signified of 'Rome.'<sup>9</sup> Untroubled by his rival's humanistic doubts, he commands both realms at the film's end, erasing

Spartacus's material presence and serving as a warning of the darker implications of a Spartacan symbolic victory. Crassus identifies completely with the male position articulated by patriarchal capitalism. A patrician who constantly invokes his 'fathers,' he commands the 'money and words' (Mulvey 1975: 208) that mark the dominant patriarch. He repeatedly involves himself in the triangular transactions that derive from the practice of exogamy as discussed by Lévi-Strauss, where women serve as objects of exchange to enable the various relations between men that power patriarchal economy.<sup>10</sup> Luce Irigaray's detailed discussion of 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex Which Is Not One* postulates that women are mere commodities, 'the material alibi for the desire for relations among men...In order for a product—a woman? to have value, two men, at least, have to invest (in) her' (Irigaray 1985:180; 181).

But as was the case with the spectacularized body in *Spartacus's* scopopic economy, so the mediating body in the film's economy of exchange does not have to belong to a female. Not only does Crassus enter into power relations with other men through the exchange of or rivalry for woman, in this case Varinia, who mediates his dealings with Spartacus, Batiatus, and Gracchus, but also through enslaved men (Antoninus) and even free Romans (Glabrus (John Dall), Caesar (John Gavin)). To underscore his extraordinary ability to commodify in the absence of sexual difference or disparities in class/economic status, the film draws parallels between Crassus's initial encounters with Varinia and with Antoninus—Crassus eyes each approvingly, asks their country of origin and 'employment history' while enslaved, and decides to take each home with him— and between the attempted sexual seduction of Antoninus and political seduction of Caesar, which both take place in bath houses.

Whatever his dealings with human beings, however, Crassus's desire is activated solely in contemplation of the phallus as signifier he calls Rome. There is an intensely erotic relationship, whose eroticism he can maintain only by disassociating Rome from any traces of materiality. When Caesar agrees with Gracchus that 'Rome is the mob,' Crassus snaps back, 'No, Rome is an eternal thought in the mind of God.' It's no accident that the two Romans who hold out against Crassus's blandishments are the pragmatic sensualists Gracchus and Batiatus.

Yet, for someone so invested in the symbolic order and given to asserting the name of the father ('Gladiator, I am Marcus Licinius Crassus; you must answer when I speak to you'), Crassus is manifestly mired in the mirror stage of narcissism. Upon hearing rumors that Varinia has caused his opponent to fall 'in love for the first time,' Gracchus muses, 'It would take a great woman to make Crassus fall out of love with himself.' If we look at all those to whom Crassus is attracted sexually or politically—the two attractions are essentially the same for

him—we notice that the actors (Simmons, Curtis, Dall, Gavin) share Olivier's classical features, dark hair, attractive physique. The two slaves have been to a certain extent Romanized, educated as companions for Roman children; Antoninus has in fact taught these children 'the classics,' has been a conduit for the replication of his masters' ideology. Glabrus, and especially Caesar, share Crassus's extended patrician pedigree: 'For 200 years your family and mine have been members of the equestrian order and the patrician party, servants and rulers of Rome.'

Crassus has fashioned an inventive structure of desire through which to achieve both narcissistic and social power. To maintain his narcissistic phantasy of omnipotence, he must efface sexual difference and the castration anxiety that accompanies it. He accordingly makes bisexual object choices which reduce gender difference to the distinction between 'oysters and snails.' He splits off the physical enjoyment of sex, now just a matter of taste, from the ecstasies of desire, which can only arise for him in relation to the signifier Rome. Thus Crassus's bantering tone in the first half of the seduction scene with Antoninus shifts to sado-masochistic fervor when he characterizes himself as avatar of Rome:

There, boy, is Rome, the might, the majesty, the terror of Rome. There is the power that bestrides the known world like a colossus. No man can withstand Rome, no nation can withstand Rome—how much less a boy. There's only one way to deal with Rome, Antoninus. You must serve her, you must abase yourself before her, you must grovel at her feet, you must love her.

(Ironically, a nervous studio cut the oysters-and-snails bath scene from the original release print, but left in the more perverse passage I have just quoted.)

Crassus, then, takes no erotic pleasure in others' bodies *per se* but can use them to establish a desiring relation to Rome. The bodies themselves are, however, interchangeable. When Spartacus defeats and symbolically castrates Glabrus ('You and that broken stick are all that's left of the garrison of Rome'), Crassus coolly casts off his former protégé in favor of Caesar as his tool for securing military control of the city. When both Varinia and Antoninus run away rather than submit to his sexual domination, he does not obsessively pursue either.

Speaking to Antoninus, Crassus describes Rome as potently masculine, yet always female—the pronoun is 'her.' By contrast, when he had told Glabrus of his own plan for gaining political control of the Senate, in essence for making Crassus another signifier for Rome, his metaphor maintained heterosexual gender distinctions: 'I shall not violate Rome at the moment of possessing her.' On the one hand Crassus, whatever his bisexual appetites, defines himself as a dominating masculine subject with Rome as the object of his desire; on the other, the female Rome

represents the phallus he must never use to conquer her. By analogy Crassus-as-Rome is always a seducer, never a rapist, more concerned with gaining his beloved's surrender than in physically consummating their union.<sup>11</sup> As he wishes Rome to receive him, so he writes himself for those whose submission he invites. He will stand phallic and erect but femininely passive rather than masculinely aggressive. They must, so to speak, rush forward to impale themselves upon him. This psychology underlies Crassus's response to the puzzled Varinia who, bedecked in jewels like one of the patrician nymphs he brought to Capua and courted via a nervous ritual that is half villainous sexual extortion and half the stumbling of an adolescent on a first date, reminds her owner, 'I belong to you; you can take me any time you wish': 'I don't want to take you. I want you to give. I want your love Varinia.'

The need for Varinia, fetishized as Rome, to submit to Crassus as eagerly as Rome has done, results from her union with Spartacus in the months that separated her initial defection from Crassus's final assumption of ownership. Realizing that she will not willingly surrender her love, Crassus is content to have her surrender instead her memories of Spartacus. At this point, she accurately diagnoses his obsession: 'You're afraid of him. That's why you want his wife. To soothe your fear by having something he had.'

Crassus's fear of Spartacus stems from the gladiator's having achieved signifying power. When Crassus had offered to spare the lives of the surviving rebels if they identified Spartacus to him, first Antoninus and then all the men rose to proclaim 'I'm Spartacus' to prevent their leader from sacrificing himself for them. Crassus recognizes the signifier 'Spartacus' rivalling the signifier 'Rome' for the power of making men surrender their subjectivities to it. Until he can have material possession of the body of the gladiator, he cannot annihilate the signifying power of his name ('What was he, was he a god?'). Varinia intuits that the willing defection of a body that Spartacus possessed, her own, would in fact only partially fulfill Crassus's need, that 'nothing can help' him.

What does help Crassus is the private spectacle he compels Spartacus and Antoninus to enact before him. An initial rebuff, when Spartacus refuses to answer to his name—signifier resisting linkage to captive body—drives Crassus to rare hysteria and physical violence. But in the end Crassus gets what he wants. By rigging the conditions of the fight so that to win is to lose, he recuperates Draba's refusal to kill Spartacus by forcing Spartacus to kill Antoninus. Twice Spartacus has been part of a spectacle in which a slave resisted Rome's command to penetrate another slave against his or her will. Now he is trapped into following that script.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, his reaction to Crassus's revelation that Varinia and the child are alive and slaves in his household leaves no doubt that this last surviving slave, and he alone, is Spartacus.

Having thus identified, spectacularized, and crucified Spartacus, Crassus can regain his imaginary plenitude. He no longer needs Varinia, which perhaps explains the puzzling omission from the film of any scene that shows his discovery of her abduction by Batiatus and manumission by Gracchus. His masculinity, while marked as perverse and monstrous, nevertheless survives intact within the diegesis.

### ‘COULD WE HAVE WON, SPARTACUS?’

Since classic Hollywood narratives dislike leaving the perverse and monstrous in the ascendant, *Spartacus* relies on its ‘future perfect’ strategy to counter Crassus’s present victory. Crassus acknowledges his fears that Spartacus’s legend may still threaten Rome’s hegemony, ‘even more’ than Caesar’s ambitions threaten Crassus’s monopoly on political power. ‘Here’s your victory,’ Spartacus has told his captors over Antoninus’s body. ‘He’ll come back. He’ll come back, and he’ll be millions.’ As a more immediate reversal of its protagonist’s defeat, the film concludes with the escape of Varinia and their child, a seeming answer to Spartacus’s prayer for a son who would be born free. As filmed, however, the sequence undercuts itself:

Varinia’s cart moves away from the camera down a path lined on both sides with crucified slaves. In Trumbo’s version, of course, the audience would assume that she and Spartacus’ child travel into a democratic future which gives value to his sacrifice; in Kubrick’s, one barely [?] visible to this film’s audience, they move into an indeterminate world where there exists only the certainty of death.

(Nelson 1982:57)

When coupled with the fact that the only male left to occupy the driver’s seat beside Varinia, usually reserved for the bearer of privileged masculinity who will complete the heterosexual couple of classical Hollywood narrative closure, is the obese, craven, avaricious slave-dealer Batiatus —*pace* Peter Ustinov’s delightful, Oscar-winning performance— this bleak landscape can represent a happy ending only as parody.<sup>13</sup>

‘Could we have won, Spartacus?’ Antoninus asks his comrade as they await their deaths. ‘Could we ever have won?’ Spartacus responds with the discourse of symbolic victory, slaves daring to say ‘no’ to tyranny, standing tall in the mountains, singing in the plains. Antoninus, however, plays materiality’s trump: ‘And now they’re dead.’ When Spartacus, following this exchange, answers Antoninus’s query as to whether he is afraid to die with the glib ‘No more than I was to be born’—especially as contrasted to Antoninus’s simple ‘Yes’ in response to the same question— we sense the inadequacy of the film’s resort to signification to efface its material tragedy.

The true victory about which Antoninus speculates could only occur with the eradication of the binaries of signification and materiality, subjectivity and subjection, Roman and animal. While *Spartacus* allows its protagonists to oscillate among all these positions, it cannot imagine a space in which such binarism collapses. The future perfect solution to masculine subjectivity, unattainable within the diegesis, is no more possible for 1960 Hollywood than for 73 BC Rome. What might this alternative masculine space look like? It would be a space where Antoninus could sing his songs without forfeiting his manhood and his life, where Spartacus could find a subjectivity not limited to Crixus's short-sighted animality nor doomed to replicate Crassus's Roman will to power. The freedom into which Spartacus's son would be born would create spectators who do not subjugate and spectacles that do not degrade. The millions in whom Antoninus's spirit would be reborn would possess a radical new human consciousness liberated from the always-already of culture and unthreatened by difference of any type.

And does any place exist where one might locate such a consciousness? Let's just say that when director Kubrick, freed from the ideological constraints he faced on *Spartacus*, attempted to represent this consciousness, he could do so only in the most embryonic form, the Starchild; and he still had to utilize the future perfect tense, assigning it an origin beyond Jupiter in the year 2001.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Steven Cohan and John Ower for helping me clarify the arguments expressed in this essay.

- 1 See Robyn Wiegman's essay in this volume for a discussion of the similar combination of feminization and hypermasculinity in the cultural portrayals of African American men. The overlapping of slavery and African heritage in the American experience probably accounts for the similar representation of the gladiators in *Spartacus*.
- 2 Kappeler's clever rewriting of John Berger's essay 'Why look at Animals?' by substituting the term *woman* for the term *animal* shows that the two identities need not be mutually exclusive. *Spartacus* insists on comparing feminized males to animals rather than women because of its massive textual anxiety about the homosexuality its male bonding evokes and Crassus overtly articulates.
- 3 *Spartacus* stops just short of overtly comparing the gladiatorial school to a film studio and the spectacularized combatants to actors. Executive producer/star Douglas's autobiography contains an undercurrent of unease about the feminization inherent in the position of the male film actor, especially in beefcake genres. He notes that he had to do 'what the starlets do' to convince the film-makers that he was physically right to play the boxer in *Champion* (1949): 'I took off my jacket and shirt, bared my chest and flexed my muscles. They nodded approvingly, satisfied that I could play a boxer. I was probably the only *man* in Hollywood who's had to strip to get a part'

- (Douglas 1988: 129). He also twice refers to studio contracts as ‘slavery.’ Kubrick, asked if it daunted him, as a relatively inexperienced director, to work with a cast of so many established stars, replied: ‘All stars, no matter how stubborn or opinionated they may be...are extremely vulnerable in front of the camera...so it’s not hard to get them to do a scene the way you want it.’ (‘Spartacus’ *Look* 1960:88).
- 4 In contrast to the Capua and Rome scenes, the scenes representing the liberated slaves are as a whole conventional in both style and content. The taut intensity of the first hour gives way to slack, perfunctory editing rhythms. In place of narrative structure, the action moves forward via clichéd montage sequences that rely on sentimental representations of cute children, sturdy oldsters, and plucky dwarfs. A number of commentators have speculated that Kubrick, who subsequently disowned *Spartacus* because his authority extended *only* to directing the actors, composing the shots, and editing the picture (Phillips 1975:85; Nelson 1982:55), used these means to sabotage those parts of the script that were uncongenial to him (see Denby 1991:96; Combs 1984:258).
  - 5 In his review of *Spartacus*, Dwight MacDonald comments: ‘As an actor, Mr. Douglas has only one asset: extreme aggressiveness’ (MacDonald 1961:24).
  - 6 Keith Bradley notes that the historical rebellion of Spartacus lacked any such symbolic aspirations and thus could not threaten the institution of slavery: ‘it becomes impossible to view the Spartan movement as being in any way dominated by abstract or ideological imperatives: freedom from slavery was the intent of the fugitives; the slavery system itself remained unaffected’ (Bradley 1989:101).
  - 7 Any chance for the film to establish Antoninus as exemplar of a privileged, non-phallic masculinity was cancelled out by the fatal miscasting of Tony Curtis in the role (puzzling since the character was created for the express purpose of finding Curtis a part in the film so that he could discharge a commitment to Universal Studios (Douglas 1988:286)). At 34, he was too old to play a character whom Crassus calls ‘a boy’ and Spartacus a surrogate son. Moreover, he recites poetry so that it sounds like prose in ‘an accent which suggests that the ancient Tiber was a tributary of the Bronx River’ (‘The New Pictures’ *Time* 1960:102); he speaks the American urban ethnic idiom of the rest of the gladiators apart from whom he is supposedly marked as Other.
  - 8 If the crucified Spartacus is meant as a precursor of Christ, his ideology is also meant to suggest that of twentieth-century American democracy. Michael Wood speculates that this latter project characterizes epics of the 1950s and 1960s generally (Wood 1975:184–8). This American ideology sits uneasily upon the film since the US itself had permitted Negro slavery for several centuries—having the African Draba strike the first blow for freedom is supposed to defuse that issue—and since Crassus’s political maneuverings link Romans to the Washington and Hollywood establishments’ behavior during the McCarthy era. Audiences were unlikely to ignore the latter parallel because of all the publicity concerning Dalton Trumbo’s screenwriting credit for *Spartacus* ‘breaking the blacklist.’ See Smith (1989:75–100) for an analysis of the film in this context.
  - 9 Crassus was the central character in the first versions of the script because Douglas felt he needed to snare Olivier in order for his Howard Fast Spartacus project to beat out a rival one, based on Arthur Koestler’s *The Gladiators*, proposed by United Artists to star Yul Brynner (see Douglas 1988:283–5).

- 10 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men*, especially chapter 3, 'Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles,' for a survey of applications of the Lévi-Strauss exogamy theory to narratology (Sedgwick 1985:21-7).
- 11 Crassus throughout the film prefers to dominate in a way that requires others to undertake physical contact. He commands his legion in terms of strategy but never raises a weapon or goes near the chaos of the fighting. His scrupulous avoidance of the mess of materiality doubtless explains the disgust on his face when he must cut Draba's neck, becoming marked by the slave's blood as he will later be by Spartacus's spit. This fastidiousness is, I would assert, more complex than Nelson's dismissive 'Hollywood liberals have the illusion that all fascists are impotent proto-McCarthys' (Nelson 1982:56).
- 12 If Spartacus had really wanted to deny the Romans the pleasure of a contest, he would have advised Antoninus that they should both simultaneously impale themselves on their swords—the Roman way Gracchus chose rather than become Crassus's stooge. But the star images of Douglas and Curtis would not have accommodated such a logical solution. Once again the Romans' desires and the film audience's coincide. Douglas jokes that he had Spartacus kill Antoninus to compensate for Curtis's Eric killing his Einar in *The Vikings* (1958) (Douglas 1988:286). By this reasoning, Varinia rejects Crassus's romantic overtures to pay back Olivier's Hamlet for repudiating Simmons's Ophelia in 1948.
- 13 Fast summarizes the life led by 'young Spartacus' as follows: 'With this kind of a life, the son of Spartacus lived and died—died in struggle and violence as his father had' (Fast 1951:363).

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