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**BLOOD, TITS AND THE MODERN DEPICTION OF ANTIQUITY – SPARTACUS: BLOOD AND SAND
AND THE DISPLAY OF A HISTORICAL MYTH**

by

Frank Jacob

INTRODUCTION

Historical topics are *en vogue* on the screen, no matter if they attract spectators as blockbusters in the cinema or as TV series at home. Especially movies or series dealing with ancient plots are a part of our consumer culture and there have been several waves of success for the genre of sword-and-sandal films. (Cornelius 4-5) *Gladiator*, *Troy*, *300*, and *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, to mention but a few examples from recent years, brought impressions of antiquity to cinemas and living rooms. Especially, the last-named TV series is an actual example of this hype, as well as its pre- or sequels, which are mostly well-known for their “often explicit visual content” (Simmons 144). Despite the fact that Lucy Lawless and John Hannah received positive critiques for their roles as the conniving owners of the gladiator school, where Spartacus is trained to become a perfect killer, the series as a whole received rather bad critiques for its lack of plot. (Ibid. 144, 151)

Only a few critics recognized the “dualistic, serio-artificial nature” (Ibid. 145) of artistic violence and soap-opera plots in a historic setting next to the depiction of sex and violence which remained an argument for the “excessive nature“ (Ibid. 146) of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, a factor that separated the series from other TV formats. Hence, the author's objective of a historical approach; the aim of the chapter is not to show whether the producers of the series were able to achieve a high grade of historicity. Consequently, it is not important whether the buildings, the clothes and the weapons are historically correct or whether the history of the world's most famous gladiator is depicted in a historically correct style. The aim of the following section is a different one. The main question is why the history of Spartacus in particular was able to attract so many generations in such a different way. How could a story of a Thracian slave who led one of the numerous slave

revolts of antiquity achieve such long durability and become the plot for so many successful artistic productions, not only on the screen, but long before, as a novel or play? Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight why the factors that were criticized – sex and violence – are responsible for the U.S.’ successful depiction of ancient slavery, instead of (for example) showing a story of the American South in the early 19th century, which could be depicted with sex and violence as well. It is decisive that ancient slavery is conveyed in a picture that enables the spectators to identify with the plot in a positive way, rather than with the cruel chapter of their own past. But how does this become possible?

Due to these questions there will first be a brief introduction on the meaning of the Spartacus Rebellion for the Roman Republic to do a continuative analysis of the historical importance of its history and its impact in the following centuries. After that, it will be highlighted why the harshly-criticized factors of the depiction of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* are integral to the series' success, as well as rather suitable aspects for the depiction of a historical plot. By overemphasizing these aspects of a slave's life in antiquity, the spectator gets a shocking impression of a long-standing part of human societies; one that he can even trace back to his own past, especially in the case of the U.S. audience. In the American South slavery was as commonplace as it was in the Roman empire.

SPARTACUS: HISTORY AND RECEPTION

In antiquity, almost anyone could become a slave. One could be born a slave, or one could become one during his life as a consequence of a lost war or even of a personal encumbrance. (Weiler 17) Once an individual had become a slave, there was no part of his life that remained free. Slaves were seen as property, without any rights and without family bonds. (Davis 30-31; Finley 91) The ancient Greek and Roman societies were both based on slavery, because around one-third of all people living in these societies were slaves. (Weiler 71) When doing research about the daily lives of such enslaved people, historians have to face the problem that most of the slaves were not able to leave

personal reports of their lives, so we mainly have to deal with the accounts of non-slaves to find out something about their situations. Without testimonies we are not able to determine how the enslaved people regarded their fate as almost totally suppressed individuals. We know of cases in which the slaves received a good education and were allowed to act as agents of their masters, but these examples are rather rare. Most enslaved individuals suffered during their suppressed existence, which could be supposed by counting the numerous revolts in the Roman Empire.

While there were fewer slaves in the early period of Roman history (Weber 231-232), their number increased in the second century B.C. as a consequence of the successful wars against Carthage and Macedonia. (Bringmann 33; Weber 239) Great wars on the Eastern and Western frontiers brought a lot of slaves to Italy and Sicily, where slaves had to work in many occupational areas. The growing number of unfree men and women in the Roman Empire had been a factor of insecurity since the middle of the second century, when more and more slaves revolted against their masters, who regarded their human property as a symbol of their own status. (Ibid. 246-247) The first great revolts shocked Sicily, where hordes of slaves fled and began to kill their former rulers and finally proclaimed their own kingdom. (Ibid. 261-266) But these revolts were far from Rome and could be suppressed by the Roman legions very fast. The Sicilian slave kingdom (Engels) was neither built to last nor to threaten the existence of the Roman society.

The Spartacus War (Weber 281-293) was to be more dangerous for the rulers of Rome, because it was almost successful. A former gladiator, Spartacus, who was “as cunning as he was strong, as experienced as he was fresh” (Strauss 1) led the slaves against the Romans, and even if there were just 74 men who fled the ludus of Batiatus, they were able to assemble around 60,000 slaves; a force that shook the foundations of the empire. Rome had to be “afraid of a runaway gladiator” as “Spartacus struck a chord in the Roman psyche” (Ibid. 2). In a period when the Roman Republic had to fight against Mithridates in Asia Minor, Sertorius in Spain, and pirates in the Mediterranean Sea, the revolt of so many slaves in the Italian heartland was especially dangerous. Additionally, as

we hear from the ancient sources of Plutarch and Appian, Spartacus was a successful military leader, who would finally become as famous as Julius Ceasar. He could not only encounter the Roman legions, but he could even win decisive battles against them. (Urbainczyk 15-16)

In his fight for freedom Spartacus reached a level much higher than that of a historical figure; he was seen as a symbol, as an idea, and as the hope of deliverance from slavery. But while he remained the typical hero for many people in subsequent centuries, some just see him as a tragic figure, because he failed to achieve his goal of freedom, but died in battle against the Roman army – in Stanley Kubrick's movie he at least could see his freeborn child while he was being crucified. As different as the views of Spartacus was the scientific approach to slavery itself. (Vogt 97-111)

During the last three centuries there has been a consistent discussion about the nature of ancient slavery and Spartacus, which was made possible by the lack of sources from the slaves themselves. We do not possess a written document by Spartacus himself, in which he could have defined his aims. Due to this there were different readings of his history, leading to Marxist interpretations about an ancient class struggle. Today it seems to be certain that the slaves were not interested in changing Roman society as a whole, but rather, they wanted to achieve their personal freedom. Nevertheless, even today there are some who depict Spartacus as the first fighter for human rights. As a consequence of this universal possibility of construction, Spartacus remains one of the most popular figures of antiquity, who was able to attract spectators in the 1960s as well as those at the beginning of the 21st century. We are all able to identify with Spartacus in one or another way and due to this we are all able to be entertained, or even inspired by his story, as so many people before us.

As early as 1760, as a consequence of the increased interest in ancient history, Bernard Saurin wrote a play about the Roman gladiator, and the great figure of enlightenment, Voltaire, named Spartacus' slave war the only just war of human history. (Urbainczyk 11) During the French Revolution the Thracian rebel was remembered as a fighter against slavery and among the black population of St.

Domingue, the French colony which would be known as Haiti after 1804 and the end of its war of independence against the European mother country, their leader Toussaint Louverture (Bell; Girard) was named a 'black Spartacus'. This name of the symbol for anti-slavery was used very often during the last decades of the 18th century, but even in the 19th century he remained a symbol. When Raffaello Giovagnoli in 1847 wrote a novel called *Spartaco* (Giovagnoli), Giuseppe Garibaldi (MacCarthy; Ridley) wrote the preface for this book, which dealt with a symbol of Italian nationalism at a time when Italy was not re-established and the people longed for national symbols, meaning national heroes. (Urbainczyk 12-13) This shows that Spartacus and his history could not only be used for revolutionary purposes, but even for national causes. However, the end of possible interpretations was not yet reached.

In the 19th century Spartacus was not just instrumentalized for the case of Italian nationalism, but even for Marxist internationalism. Karl Marx named Spartacus one of the most important persons of antiquity, who would exert a special impact on communism in general during the following times, so his history would become a political myth as well. (Guarino 13-15) Soviet historians described Spartacus' war as a crisis of ancient civilization and determined its role using the Marxist model of history. When some decades later the First World War divided Europe there was a division of the German workers' movement as well. The radical left created the *Spartakusbund*, whose members attacked the Social Democratic Party for not criticizing the war. (Waldman 13-14) The Spartacus movement would later become the German Communist Party, but the historical figure of Spartacus remained an important symbol for the party, whose well-known member Karl Liebknecht said about the ancient man: "Spartacus means the fire and spirit, the heart and soul, the will and deed of the revolution of the proletariat." (Urbainczyk 9) Despite the fact that he was mainly instrumentalized in times of political crisis, with the end of the Second World War the door was opened for a more artistic vehicle of Spartacus' reception.

In 1959 the soviet composer Aram Khachaturian won the Lenin prize for his ballet, which provided

an interpretation of the historical figure, who was still well-known and important in the soviet bloc. (Strauss 4) But not only communist artists tried to create their own version of the myth. In 1960 the Stanley Kubrick movie *Spartacus* was released and Kirk Douglas became the actor who was instantly associated with the historical man. (Urbainczyk 10) To use the history of *Spartacus* for political reasons were no soviet privilege, because even U.S. president Ronald Reagan “cited him as an example of sacrifice and struggle for freedom.” (Strauss 4) Regardless of his international and political – no matter which point of political view people possessed – renown, one question remains. Why did Spartacus become the most well-known leader of a rebellion of slaves, of whom historians can identify so many during the long history of slavery? One possible explanation is that Spartacus was a professional fighter, named with the term “gladiator, a word synonymous with sex, violence, and death” (Urbainczyk 14). Especially with regard to this connotation, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* does exactly deliver the image which the audience wants to see when thinking about this specific historical figure. So how far is the negative criticism of the serial justified?

BLOOD AND SAND: HISTORICAL STORY, MODERN INTERPRETATION

As has been shown so far, the topic of Spartacus can be used for different discussions and to highlight totally different points of view. (Foka 2) While this aspect could be analyzed for different parameters, e.g. the role of strong females in the series (Ibid. 3), I would like to focus on three main points: slavery, sex, and violence. It seems to be obvious that “[t]he idea of ancient Rome, city of power, intrigue, beauty, brutality and lust, has always attracted and entertained modern film audiences” (Ibid. 3), but why is a series that depicts the harsh and brutal slave trade system of ancient Rome so successful in the United States?

The answer seems to be really simple. The slaves of ancient Rome are not the Negro slaves of the U.S. South. When one sees Spartacus, a Thracian enslaved among people from other ethnic origins - like Crixus, who is Gallic; Drago, who is Nubian; or other gladiators from several countries - there

is no ethnic homogeneous community. What the spectator sees is the result of Roman warfare and the existing slave trade. But there is also Varo, who sold himself as a slave to gain money as a gladiator. All in all, the fact that there is a heterogeneous group of men from several countries – one could call it a multicultural community of slaves – fighting to achieve fame, honor and possibly their freedom, provides an image that many people can understand with regard to their own lives, living in a multicultural community like the United States, where they are longing to achieve the American Dream of fame, honor and success. (Samuel) This picture might be more pleasant than the image of a cotton plantation in the American South, where Negroes are beaten by white slave owners. The history of ancient slavery in general, and that of Spartacus in particular, is not incriminated, which makes it easier for a U.S. audience to enjoy. It is interesting that the critics have talked a lot about the explicit content of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, but not about this topic, especially with regard to the American critics. However, there are many sex scenes, but is this just a consequence of the entertainment industry of the 21st century?

When Batiatus and his wife are stimulated by female slaves before having sex the audience might be shocked and it seems to be a fact that “women are represented lightly dressed as well as naked” (Foka 5) in every episode. With regard to historical facts, these rather weird scenes are not simply exaggerations. Female slaves had to provide sexual pleasure for their masters and mistresses and could be leased for sex as well. (Vogt 6) Furthermore, the Roman Empire was depicted as a decadent world, where orgies were common in many noble families. Such episodes could be reconstructed by written or archaeological evidence, so the depiction of odd sexual practices is not just a play with tabooed contents; it is also a mirror – albeit exaggerated in some aspects – of ancient history. People were sold as slaves and had to serve, even in a sexual way, and when Batiatus orders his slaves to have sex in front of their guests, that is nothing which could not have happened in ancient Capua. For the modern-day spectator, “aesthetic fantasies of sex and violence discharge an ambivalent fascination for the recipient” (Ritzer 49) by depicting something outside of

his personal imagination. Due to this the sexual content of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* is not only 'eye-candy' for the male – and even female – audience, but also an exaggeration of historical facts. Even more shocking than the naked bodies seems to be the stream of blood in the arena and on the battlefields.

The episodes are “chock full of fantasy violence” (Elia 76) and the cineaste is reminded of Zack Snyder's *300* or Takeshi Kitano's *Zatoichi* (Gibbs 63-64), in which blood becomes part of the fighting choreography. In the same way, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* “devotes substantial airtime to digitalized blood splatter, decapitation, and battlefield carnage.” (Elia 83) The violence is used in an artistic way; to exaggerate, but also to emphasize the use of violence in the arena. It is decontextualized as well and the audience will recognize it as a fantastic and drastically overemphasized part of the story. (Simmons 146) But aside from this fact, the use of violence also resembles modern video games, where a similarly shocking depiction of blood can be seen. Next to this, the series in many aspects resembles the several stages of a typical video game. (Ibid. 148-149) This will be especially obvious when one plays the iPhone game *Spartacus*, in which the former spectator becomes *Spartacus* and is imitating the history series in the single stages of training and fighting.

In addition, the exaggerated use of violent scenes also resembles masculinity, which is an essential part of the sword-and-sandal film genre in which the sword could also be seen as a male phallus. (Cornelius 2) Like other movies of this genre *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* tends to “reproduce familiar, patriarchal constructions of masculinity for their audiences” (Elia 84) in which the hero uses the sword as an instrument of male violence. (Cornelius 3-4) Besides this, the genre in general and *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* in particular show exactly what the audience expects to see: half-naked men fighting with swords to produce streams of blood in which the bad guys are drowned for their bad behavior. (Ibid. 5) But violence plays another role in the series. It is part of *Spartacus*' story of becoming a hero, because the traditional heroic epos needs violence. As a Thracian,

Spartacus is a warrior (Strauss 7) from his first appearance onwards, and will be further advised how to kill during his time in Batiatus' *ludus*. It is usual for the hero to have to suffer on his way to heroism (Elia 79), which is why Spartacus has to endure violent treatment from Drago and Crixus in order to become stronger. That Spartacus finally becomes the leader of the rebels is not his primary target, because this is simply revenge, an aim pursued by many heroes in the sword-and-sandal genre. (Cornelius 8) To sum up, violence is not just a shocking element to attract a male audience. It was a reality in the ancient arenas like the Colosseum of Rome, and it is an essential part of video game culture, which is portrayed by the series and is an important factor of the heroic epos, in which violence has several levels of existence. Spartacus, the former Thracian soldier, has to become a well-trained killer in order to finally succeed and be remembered among the Romans as the well-known hero.

CONCLUSION

All in all, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* is an exaggerated mirror of historical events, which certainly aims to entertain. By depicting one of the most well-known ancient plots it meets all expectations of the audience (Foka 4) and is able to “operate as a vehicle for the pleasurable extremes that certain pop cultural texts often offer.” (Simmons 144) The fact that most critics don't speak about the series in a positive way is not astonishing, but on the other hand, it is not remarkable that so many people like the modern depiction of this ancient plot either.

The fact that *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* shows more sex scenes and violence than Stanley Kubrick's version of 1960 is just natural, because our society has changed and the tolerance for taboos has just increased. To conclude that the series is trash simply because men are slaughtered and females are depicted as sex objects is too simple an explanation. Most images are historical facts. Men were slaughtered in the arenas, slave women had to serve their masters in a sexual way, and to imagine that decadent Rome was not frivolous at all is rather a conservative wish than a

historical fact. Due to this, the historian has to conclude that *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* is just another depiction of the well-known plot, but mainly different from those of earlier decades. Every time has its own suitability of the myth. While the Marxists considered Spartacus to be a proto-communist leader who freed the slaves of the Roman Empire, today's audience considers the Thracian gladiator to be a muscle-man who lived in a world of sex and violence.

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