

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SPARTACUS (1960)

Stanley Kubrick

OVERVIEW Based on a true story from ancient Roman history, the film was produced on an epic scale, with panoramic shots of the countryside, a host of Hollywood stars and three hours duration. Rivalling *Ben Hur* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, it is sensational and gripping, and deviates from historical accuracy in the interests of drama. The film script is an adaptation of a novel by the same name written by Howard Fast, a leftist writer in McCarthy-era America. That contemporary political context is referenced in the opening words by the narrator, who describes Rome as a republic 'that lay fatally stricken with a disease called human slavery' and introduces Spartacus as a 'proud, rebellious son dreaming of the death of slavery, 2000 years before it finally would die.' The overt political tone of the film resulted in protests from right-wing groups in the US, who picketed cinemas; the controversy raged until President Kennedy crossed the picket lines to attend a screening. The film also faced opposition from the censors over its overt brutality and frontal nudity, necessitating numerous cuts and versions. In the end, the film enjoyed popularity among those viewers who like a lavish Hollywood production as well as those who approved of its political message. It won a host of awards, including Best Picture at the Golden Globes.

SYNOPSIS Spartacus is a slave, who is recruited to be trained as a gladiator. While in training, he leads a revolt and then forms a slave army that threatens the stability of Rome. He also meets and falls in love with a slave named Varinia, with whom he has a son. While his army overruns the countryside, politicians in the Roman Senate fight their own battles against each other. Using the threat of Spartacus' revolt, Crassus and Gracchus bribe, scheme and plot against each other. In the end, Crassus wins that competition, Spartacus is killed and Varinia taken as Crassus' mistress. But she rejects him, escapes as a free citizen with her son and bids farewell to Spartacus just before he is executed.

MAIN CHARACTERS

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| Spartacus | Spartacus is a slave and gladiator trainee who leads a slave army. |
| Batiatus | Batiatus is the owner of the gladiator training school. |
| Crassus | Crassus is a rich and powerful politician. |
| Gracchus | Gracchus is a politician and rival of Crassus. |
| Glabrus | Glabrus is Crassus' brother-in-law. |
| Antoninus | Antoninus is a male slave desired by Crassus. |
| Caesar | Caesar is a young politician and protégé of Gracchus. |
| Varinia | Varinia is a slave who marries Spartacus. |

STORY

Slave A grave voiceover tells us that Spartacus was sold into slavery in Libya when he was twelve years old. We see him and his fellow slaves working in a mine, where he would spend another decade, all the time dreaming of freedom. The work is hard, the conditions harsh and the Roman overseers cruel. When Spartacus halts work to help a fellow slave, he is chained to a rock, and left to starve to death. He is rescued when bought by a rich man, Batiatus, and taken to Italy to fight as a gladiator. First, though Spartacus must be trained, and tamed.

Gladiator school The school trains young slaves to become killers, for the entertainment of the crowd. Some, the lucky ones, live for five or ten years. One or two become free men. Batiatus, the owner of the school, tells his trainer not to overdo his breaking-in of Spartacus because 'he has quality.' The trainer tries to goad Spartacus to attack him, but Spartacus wisely does not rise to the bait: if he had, he would have been killed. The training is thorough and brutal since the men are being groomed to kill. Spartacus excels in every element of the training.

Varinia Young women slaves are sent to the trainees for sexual pleasure. As they are assigned to each man, Batiatus sees to it that Varinia, the most attractive of them, goes to Spartacus. But Spartacus refuses to take advantage of her and they establish a rapport. Noticing their mutual attraction, the trainer humiliates them both.

Crassus Crassus, a rich Roman senator, arrives at the training school with a retinue and is welcomed with great pomp. Crassus announces that they (his wife, sister-in-law and her fiancé, Glabrus) have come to celebrate Glabrus's marriage and wish to see two pairs of gladiators fight. 'To the death,' adds Crassus' wife. But Batiatus explains that he cannot allow that, he must keep his trainees alive so that they can be sold on. Besides, fighting to the death would ruin the morale within the school. Crassus proposes to buy the trainees and Batiatus names an exorbitant price, which he accepts. The ladies also ask that they be allowed to choose the contestants, and they select Spartacus along with three others.

Fight to the death When the spectacle is staged and Spartacus is wounded, the guests call on his opponent to kill him. Instead, the gladiator lunges at the guests and tries to kill them. But it is he who dies. Nevertheless, it is a foreshadowing of the later revolt and makes an impression on Spartacus, who survives.

Riot The next day, Spartacus sees Varinia being driven away to Crassus' house in Rome. When Marcellus informs him that she has been bought, he attacks and kills him. A full-scale riot breaks out and the trainees beat off their guards and escape into the surrounding countryside. Alarmed, the Senate sends an army headed by Glabrus (Crassus' son-in-law) to quell the slave riot.

Political schemes A power struggle between two Roman senators, Crassus and Gracchus, increases. At his country villa, Crassus receives gifts from Sicily, including a young man who is a singer and a scholar, whom Crassus chooses as his personal servant. He is Antoninus. Glabrus arrives to tell Crassus of his glorious appointment as army commander, but Crassus is angry because he knows that sending him out of Rome is a move intended to weaken Crassus' control of the city. When he is told that the city will be under the command of Caesar, Crassus is even more incensed because Caesar is his sworn enemy.

Slave army Spartacus turns his rebels into a proper slave army who roam over the countryside. He is joined by Varinia, who escapes while being taken to Crassus, and by Antoninus, whom Crassus tried to treat as a sex slave. Spartacus's goal is to escape from Italy by the sea and he strikes a bargain to purchase 500 ships in seven months time. First, he must take his army across the width of the Italian peninsula all the way to the port of Brindisi. As they march across, the slave army defeats the Roman army commanded by Glabrus.

Politics in Rome When Glabrus returns to Rome in humiliation, Crassus renounces his command of his legions. Gracchus has his protégé, Caesar, confirmed as his replacement and also gets the Senate to put Crassus in command of another army to attack Spartacus. Gracchus then reveals that he has done a deal with the pirates (Rome will not attack them) in order to make sure that Spartacus buys the ships from them and leaves Italy. At the last moment, though, Crassus intervenes and pays the pirates to withdraw, thus leaving Spartacus with no escape route. Leading his army, Crassus then traps Spartacus in a pincer movement, forcing him to return to Rome and fight him there. Crassus believes he can defeat him and become the saviour of Rome, and its dictator.

Battle In barren, treeless countryside, with panoramic camera shots, we see the two armies confront each other. Hand-to-hand fighting leaves thousands dead, but Spartacus survives, along with many others taken prisoner. The prisoners are told that they will not be killed on condition that they identify the dead body or the living man of the slave called Spartacus. Just as Spartacus stands up to identify himself, all the others say they are Spartacus.

Return to Rome As punishment, Crassus has thousands of the captured slaves slaughtered, and the others are taken to Rome to perform fights-to-the-death. In Rome, the victorious Crassus seizes power in the Senate and exiles Gracchus. Gracchus sends Varinia, who also survived, and her child to his house in Rome, where he treats her like a pampered mistress. She, however, does not submit to him.

Spartacus seized Crassus recognises Spartacus and orders him to entertain him with a fight-to-the-death against Antoninus. The victor will then be crucified. Spartacus tells Antoninus not to give them the pleasure of seeing them fight. 'Let me kill you with the first blow,' he says. But Antoninus fights and tries to kill Spartacus because then he (Antoninus) and not Spartacus will be crucified by the Romans. Spartacus wins and is tied to a cross, to be executed in the morning, along with many others.

Farewell Gracchus provides Batiatus with money and papers and sends him, with Varinia and her

child, safely out of Rome. As they leave, Varinia sees Spartacus on the cross. She shows him the child and says, 'This is your son. And he is free. He'll remember you because I'll tell him who his father was and what he dreamed of.' Although he manages a tiny smile, Spartacus says nothing and watches as the cart take her away.

THEMES

Inequality The overarching theme of the film is the inequality and brutality of slavery. As with other Kubrick films, the director highlights the brutality but also the psychology of the slave condition. The opening scene, on a rocky hillside in Libya, is harsh and agonising. Men struggle in the heat, carrying large baskets full of heavy stones. Overseers whip them if they stop or stumble. The resentment built up in a man treated this way is illustrated when Spartacus stops to help another slave who has fallen over. When Spartacus is whipped, he bites the overseer's leg, his only way to fight back. Throughout the rest of the film, we see men and women bought and sold for labour and for sex. The gladiators are elite slaves, trained to fight like animals, killing each other for the pleasure of gaping Roman audiences. They have no fear of death, which is, ironically, what makes them such ferocious soldiers, able to defeat the vaunted Roman legions. This lack of fear of death is expressed in the scene when the pirates' emissary asks Spartacus if he would fight if he knew he would die. Spartacus says he would. 'Even knowing you would die?' the man asks. 'All men lose when they die,' Spartacus answers. 'When a free man dies, he loses the pleasure of life; a slave loses his pain. Death is the only freedom a slave knows. That's why he's unafraid of death.' We remember this when we watch the final scene, with Spartacus tied to a cross, awaiting crucifixion. Inequality is the defining feature of slavery.

Love Mitigating the misery of slavery is the redemptive power of love. Slaves, the film wants to show us, are still human beings, possessing dignity and capable of affection. This countervailing theme is played out in the relationship that develops between Spartacus and Varinia, a character based on historical sources and not purely the invention of the script writer. They first meet when Varinia is sent to Spartacus, as other slave women are sent to other trainees at the gladiator school. Spartacus does not abuse her, though, and their love begins with mutual attraction and respect. She is later bought by Crassus, escapes and joins Spartacus's army. They marry and she becomes pregnant, though Spartacus does not see his son until the very end, just before he dies. That child, born of slaves, is free (arranged by Gracchus). He embodies hope, the possibility of freedom, which has been nurtured by love. The love between Spartacus and Varinia stands in contrast to the sordid lust that drove Crassus to buy her. Their love is the pulsating heart of the film.

Ambition A third theme, which is integral to the plot but on a different plane altogether, is political ambition and struggle. In representing the complexities of power plays within the Roman Senate, the film gains considerable historical authenticity. At its core, this story pits Crassus (a historical figure), who represents the patrician class, against Gracchus (not an historical figure), who leads the populist faction in the Senate. Although Gracchus is certainly the more affable character, both men are ambitious, scheming and ruthless in their attempts to gain control of the Senate and thus the Roman empire. The war against the slave army becomes a political pawn in their struggles against each other. Gracchus bribes pirates in order to allow the slave army to escape (thus preventing his rival from gaining glory by defeating the slaves). At the same time, Crassus bribes the pirates to do the opposite and keep Spartacus in Italy so that he can fight them. Both men claim they act nobly in the interests of Rome, but it is clear that their vision of the empire is inseparable from their personal ambitions. Gracchus also schemes to bring his own protégé, Caesar, to power, while Crassus has similar plans for his associates. These political shenanigans in the Senate underscore the powerlessness of the slaves and the slave army. While a senator's actions may result in favourable consequences for the slave army, that is not the primary objective. The goal of the politicians is to increase their power within the Senate.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Spartacus Spartacus is a formidable figure. He is a slave with an indomitable spirit who dreams of freedom and nearly achieves it. He is physically strong, mentally agile and emotionally controlled. Although brutalised from a young age as a slave, he retains the dignity and compassion of his human birth.

Unbowed The key to Spartacus is his resolute determination not to give in to his masters. This is clearly illustrated in the opening scene, when he and his fellow slaves are shown working in extreme

heat. Each man carries a heavy load of quarried stones on his back in a deep basket. The landscape is harsh, just craggy hills, from which the men must extract rock using primitive tools. We watch as Spartacus shoulders another load and staggers forward under the weight. When a fellow slave falls down from exhaustion, he instinctively goes to his aid, throwing down his own basket. This dereliction of duty earns him lashes from an overseer. In retaliation, Spartacus takes a chunk of flesh from his lower leg. 'Spartacus, again, huh?' one of the guards says. Spartacus is tied to a rock and left to starve. Here, in a few brief moments, is the whole story. Spartacus is a slave; he is cruelly mistreated; he shows compassion; he is beaten within an inch of his life. But the most important element in this scene is that Spartacus, even when bound to the rock, is unbowed. Just as in the last scene, when he is again tied up (this time to a cross), he never surrenders. He does not accept his destiny as a slave.

Tender The other, equally important, part of Spartacus is his compassion, which is already hinted at in the above scene. A more sustained display of this quality comes in the first scene between Spartacus, the gladiator trainee, and Varinia, the slave woman assigned to him for sexual pleasure. She has, in fact, been sent to him by order of Batiatus (owner of the gladiator school) because he senses that Spartacus has 'quality.' Varinia enters the cell, resigned to perform her 'duty', with downcast eyes. Spartacus gently touches her hair and neck. She moves forward as if to get it over with, but he stops her and caresses her hair. 'I've never had a woman,' he says in a deep voice. Still silent, Varinia slips off her smock and faces him, nude. Suddenly, Batiatus appears in the window in the roof of the cell, leering at them and encouraging him. 'I'm not an animal!' he shouts at them as they disappear. After he repeats that sentence, she says, 'Neither am I.' Spartacus hands her smock back to her and allows her to dress and leave, unharmed. He merely asks her name and she gives it to him. Here, Spartacus shows us that he can be as gentle as the gentlemen of civilised Rome. He was aroused by her body (admitting that he's never 'had' a woman), but when she repeats his claim about not being 'an animal', he forgets his lust and shows her tenderness. This is the beginning of slowly evolving love affair, an island of humanity in a sea of brutality and bloody ambition.

Moral leader Combining these two qualities (rebelliousness and compassion), Spartacus is also a natural-born leader with a moral code. When he leads the slave revolt, he does not do so in order to punish the slave-owners with death; he is more controlled and intelligent than to turn his army into a mob. Instead, he infuses his men with purpose and confidence, a belief in their own worth and power. A good illustration of his moral leadership comes shortly after the escape from the gladiator school. Returning to the school, the slave army forces landowners to engage in a fight-to-the-death, a spectacle for them to enjoy, thus turning the tables on their former masters. But Spartacus recognises the moral emptiness of tit-for-tat revenge, which only degrades the slaves, as it once did the masters., Spartacus enters the ring and calls a halt to the bloodletting event. 'What are we becoming?' he asks the crowd, implying that they are imitating the despicable immorality of the Romans. When a man asks what else can they be, Spartacus gives them a vision. 'Gladiators,' he says. 'An army of gladiators. There has never been one. Any gladiator is worth any two Roman soldiers.' Another man points out that the Roman army is huge, but Spartacus has answers. His slave army will free every slave in the empire, who will then join them, forming the largest army ever seen. A third man wants to know how they can escape from Italy and Spartacus has an answer for him, too. They won't go over the Alps; they'll go by sea. With this speech, Spartacus has transformed a drunken mob into an army, with dignity and direction. His leadership is unmistakable.

Crassus Crassus is rich, powerful, vain and arrogant. He is the leader of the patrician class in Senate and has ambitions to become dictator. He has strong appetites, including sexual ones, which he is ruthless in satisfying. He thinks of himself as a symbol of all that is 'decent and good about Rome', but his own personal flaws mean that he never lives up to his own ideals. 'Crass' would be a good nickname.

Manipulator Crassus, with his reptilian smile, is always calculating how to manipulate a situation to his advantage. There are many examples, but the earliest one is typical. He has brought his wife, Helena, and her brother, Glabrus, and his fiancé, to the gladiator school to enjoy a fight-to-the-death. As they relax with wine, Helena chides Crassus for not having given her brother a wedding gift. Crassus issues an indulgent smile and plucks a necklace from inside his tunic. From the chain hangs a large medallion that is only worn by the commander of the garrison of Rome. Everyone is thrilled, and Glabrus says he doesn't know how he will repay him. Again, that snaky smile from Crassus, who says, 'Time will solve that mystery.' He speaks the truth, for soon Crassus will withdraw from public life, requiring an ally to take control of Rome. What better ally is there than a brother-in-law?

Sexual predator Rich Crassus is also vain and self-centred. If he wants something, or someone, he gets it. For example, he buys Varinia on a whim, having just glimpsed her once or twice at the gladiator school. But he sets a more deliberate and cunning plot to entrap Antoninus. Antoninus is first brought to Crassus' house with a group of other slaves sent to him as a gift by the governor of Sicily. Crassus spots the handsome Antoninus and tells him that he will be his 'body servant'. What this means is revealed in a later scene, when a naked Crassus is bathed by Antoninus. During the massage, Crassus engages his servant in a discussion about taste and appetite, implying that his own tastes are wide and beyond reproach. Stepping from the bath, Crassus puts on a robe and looks out at a panoramic view of Rome. 'There is Rome,' he says, with his conspiratorial smile. 'The power that bestrides the known world like a colossus. There is only one way to serve Rome. You must serve her. Abase yourself before her.' He is telling Antoninus that, in effect, he must become his sex slave. For in his mind, he stands for Rome.

Gracchus Gracchus is a wise old bird and a Roman senator, who represents the populist faction in the Senate. He is shrewd and amoral, but also shows compassion toward Varinia. Despite his amorality, he is affable, genial and able to see points of view from the perspective of others.

Shrewd If Crassus is manipulative, his life-long rival, Gracchus, is a supremely shrewd politician. His Machiavellian quality is revealed midway through the story in one of the many scenes set in the Roman Senate. The slave revolt has frightened Romans and the Senate debates what to do. Gracchus proposes to send a large army against them to be commanded by Glabrus (ally of Crassus). Young Glabrus accepts this assignment, being too naïve to grasp its real motive. That settled, Gracchus then suggests that the garrison of Rome (up to now commanded by Glabrus) should be under the command of Caesar, who is the protégé of Gracchus. Two ends are achieved. By sending Glabrus out of Rome to chase Spartacus, he has deprived Crassus of his main ally in the struggle to control Rome. And, second, he has put his own man in charge of the capital.

Amoral Gracchus is a politician who aims to achieve certain ends, without the inconvenience of having to consider the morality or otherwise of his actions. This characteristic is illustrated in a later scene, again in the Roman Senate, after Spartacus has defeated the armies sent against him and is heading for the port of Brindisi to escape from Italy by sea. Learning that Crassus plans to defeat Spartacus by blocking his escape, Gracchus is alarmed. If Crassus defeats Spartacus, he will have the political capital to take over Rome and become a dictator. In order to prevent that, Gracchus bribes the pirates at Brindisi to let Spartacus escape. When he reveals this underhanded ploy to Caesar, the young idealist is shocked at this corruption. 'So, now you deal with pirates?' he asks in disbelief. Gracchus signs and says, 'Politics is a practical business. If a pirate has what you want, you do business with him.' Gracchus has no qualms about whom he deals with. Only the end matters.

Compassionate As a leader of the populist faction in the Senate, Gracchus is more compassionate and less elitist than Crassus. The old man's sympathy for the underdog is dramatised best in the closing scenes of the film. Varinia has been bought as a mistress for Crassus, who has exiled Gracchus has been exiled from Rome. Spartacus has been identified and strung up for crucifixion. Before he goes into exile, Gracchus summons Batiatus and gives him bags of money to look after Varinia and her child. He has also used his authority as a senator to sign documents granting them the right to travel on the roads and making Varinia and her child free citizens. In recognition of his kindness, Varinia kisses his head. It is one of the few moments of affection in the long film.

Varinia Varinia is a slave woman, who falls in love with Spartacus, marries him and bears his child. She is fiercely loyal to Spartacus and his ideals, and she is also perceptive about the people around her. She is the female equivalent of Spartacus.

Loyal After the slave army is defeated, Varinia is taken to Crassus' house as his mistress. She is dressed in finery and wooed by Crassus, who desires her. He tries to convince her to give up her attachment to Spartacus, the lawless renegade, and embrace her new life with him, a life of luxury and decency. She is strong and refuses to accept him as her protector or lover or husband. Rebuffed, Crassus openly asks her to describe Spartacus. 'What sort of a man was he, really?' he asks. 'He was a man who began life as an animal. Yet, when he died, thousands and thousands would have gladly died in his place.' Unnerved, Crassus laughs and asks if he was a god. 'No,' she says, 'he was a simple man. A slave. And I loved him.' Now, Crassus is enraged and screams, 'He was an outlaw!' At that point, Varinia understands him. 'You're afraid of him, aren't you?' she says. 'That's why you want his wife. To soothe your fear by possessing something of his.' In this scene,

Varinia displays not only her loyalty but also her intelligence.

Proud The pride that Varinia feels for her husband, hinted at in the above scene, is fully illustrated in the final scene of the film. Varinia and her child have been granted freedom by Gracchus and sent out of Rome, in the company of Batiatus. As their cart rolls out of the city gates, she sees Spartacus strung up on a cross, ready for death the next day. She stops and looks up at him. She does not cry and she says very little, but what she says is significant. She shows him their son and says that the child will remember his father because she 'will tell him who his father was and what he dreamed of.' Varinia doesn't just love Spartacus. She reveres him, his life, his death and the freedom he imagined.



(Spartacus chained to a rock)



(Spartacus leads his slave army)



(Crassus woos Varinia)