Performances of Jewish Identity: Spartacus

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Performances of Jewish Identity: *Spartacus*

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Produced at the height of the cold war, the gladiator film *Spartacus* (1960) is recognized as an answer to HUAC’s red-baiting members of the Hollywood film community. Unexplored, however, has been the hypothesis that the film is a production expressing cultural aspects of Jewish identity and memory. Considering the multiple authorship of Howard Fast, Dalton Trumbo, Kirk Douglas, and Stanley Kubrick, this paper examines aspects of the film that suggest not only a response to oppression on American soil, but also a recognition of broader forms of imperialism or fascism, such as the Nazi genocide of Jews in the Holocaust.

Probing the imprint of the Holocaust upon American culture, scholars are revisiting cultural productions of the years immediately following World War II in an effort to discern the impact of the catastrophe at a time when Americans were largely silent about the Shoah. A search for the effects of the Holocaust on American culture in the Eisenhower era suggests a concomitant recognition of the work of those Americans who self-identified as Jewish at that time. Thus the film *Spartacus* (1960), initiated and produced by a man who freely identified himself as Jewish, invites scrutiny for traces of Jewish identity and of the effects of the Shoah. To conclude that *Spartacus* is an expression of Jewish identity is problematic at best, however, for the film is a Hollywood blockbuster about a slave revolt against the Roman Empire circa 70 B.C.E. The spectacular, based on Howard Fast’s eponymous novel, bears executive producer Kirk Douglas’s signature as it features a virile hero and his romantic involvement with a beautiful leading lady—a story foregrounded in the screenplay by screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. Summoned to direct the movie fourteen days
into production, Stanley Kubrick created scenes winning the praise of those disgruntled with other aspects of the film. These four figures—Fast, Douglas, Trumbo, and Kubrick—played major roles in shaping the film. At the time of the film’s production, Fast, Douglas, and Kubrick identified themselves as having Jewish roots, but all had assimilated fairly seamlessly into American life. Dalton Trumbo was not Jewish. The novel employs neither a Jewish hero nor a Jewish community; the screenplay follows a generic formula for the gladiator film. There is seemingly nothing overtly Jewish about the film.

And yet, the concerns of the film appear to accord with narratives and concepts collectively remembered in Jewish ritual and literature over millennia: enslavement, freedom, compassion, justice, brotherhood, a love of learning, a longing for home, catastrophe, lamentation. A motif running through the film is the preciousness of freedom: “He is free,” are among Varinia’s final words to Spartacus, and the final words of the film, as she shows him their son. Another motif, the ability of individuals to empathize with others, appears in the theme of brotherhood. The gladiators, enslaved from every people within the far-flung reach of the Roman Empire, embody the culturally diverse platoon, a brotherhood made up of the oppressed of every nation. The opportunity to learn, the desire to attain a knowledge of the universe that both Spartacus yearns for and the poet Antoninus expresses: these are traits associated with Jewish tradition. Another motif, the ability to choose, to express moral agency in a decadent world demanding loyalty to an ideology and bloodlust as entertainment, emerges as a Jewish concern. Finally, intimations of the darkness of the memory of the Shoah seep into the film.

Of the four men who initially shaped the film, Douglas, Fast, and Kubrick came from Jewish families of Eastern European roots. Recalling his mother’s lighting of the Sabbath candles, Issur Danielovitch, even while assimilating as Kirk Douglas into American life, remembered his Judaic roots. Howard Fast, whose family surname upon arriving in the United States was Fastov, relinquished a literal belief in Judaism, but held to the principles culturally transmitted to him and fought for the rights of the oppressed. Stanley Kubrick, born to Jewish parents who were not observant, still strongly identified as Jewish and sometimes justified decisions in filmmaking on the basis of

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his Jewish identity.² Kirk Douglas, in his 1988 autobiography *The Ragman’s Son*, describes the trajectory of his life as one of struggling to find his Jewishness.³ More recently Douglas has written that after his sixtieth birthday, he began, as the Talmud suggests, to reflect upon his life, and he finds the search for his Jewish identity and a movement toward Judaism to be central themes. Distinguishing between, on the one hand, Jewishness as identification with a social group and, on the other, Judaism as performance of behavior culturally reproduced, Douglas constructs a narrative of his life that frames it in terms of Jewishness and Judaism.

*Spartacus* was Howard Fast’s defense of his work on behalf of the persecuted and exploited. Concerned for the rights of the workers of the world, Fast had joined the Communist Party USA as a young man and addressed the theme of equal rights for African Americans. His 1944 novel *Freedom Road*, exploring social and political instability during Reconstruction,⁴ appeared at a moment when American liberal political efforts on behalf of African Americans had declined and yet race relations were about to return to national attention.⁵ Because of Fast’s affiliation with the CPUSA and his support of civil rights activists such as Communist Party member Paul Robeson, the FBI opened a file tracking his writings and activities.⁶ They felt that they had enough information to incriminate him when he refused to cooperate with the House Committee on Un-American Activities investigations of members of the Hollywood Writers Guild who had ties with the Communist Party. In 1950, facing prison, Fast researched the figure of Spartacus, a Thracian

²In *The Wolf at the Door*, Geoffrey Cocks quotes Kubrick’s refusal, for example, of the offer to make a film of the memoirs of Albert Speer: “It’s fascinating stuff. But, you know, the thing is—how can I do it when I’m Jewish? I would love to make it, but how can I as a Jew?” (p. 150).


gladiator who for two years successfully led slaves against the Roman empire.\footnote{http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/03/13/national/main543830.html.}

Searching for discussion of Spartacus in Plutarch’s Lives of the Noble Romans and in Appian’s History of the Servile War, Fast found him mentioned almost as an aside in the story of the victorious Roman General Marcus Licinius Crassus. Even so, the memory of Spartacus has been powerful for centuries, and in the early twentieth century Spartacus was invoked, by European socialists such as Rosa Luxemburg, as a heroic worker who fought the exploitation of capital and empire. Fast wrote Spartacus, as he explains in his dedication to his children, so that they might know about the courage of individuals who fight for the rights of the oppressed.\footnote{Howard Fast, Spartacus (London: Bodley Head, 1951).}

Contributing to the development of the film Spartacus were the filmmakers’ concerns with civil liberties, human rights, and the relation between power and oppression. Like Fast, Dalton Trumbo had been imprisoned by the U.S. government for refusing to cooperate in HUAC investigations. Kirk Douglas, watching the destruction of careers that ensued from HUAC’s accusations, sought to break the Hollywood blacklist. Although director Stanley Kubrick was later, as historian Geoffrey Cocks observes, to voice his dissatisfaction with the film Spartacus, his work on it furthered his critique of American society. Douglas, Fast, Trumbo, and Kubrick hoped to use their art as corrective or as vision, to criticize or to suggest an alternative to the hostilities of the politically powerful.

Rebuking the most powerful government in the world, these filmmakers might have chosen the genre addressing entire civilizations and peoples: the epic. Ostensibly narrating historic event, the epic film actually celebrates the moment in which it is made. As classics scholar Maria Wyke has written in her book Projecting the Past, epic film plots set in ancient Rome create their own distinctive historiography of ancient Rome that has vividly resurrected the ancient world and reformulated it in the light of present needs.\footnote{Maria Wyke, Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 8.} A “present need” felt by HUAC and the United States government in the 1950s, writes scholar Melani McAlister, was the waging of the Cold War. Discussing the epic film and the invention of American tradition, McAlister suggests that Cecil B. DeMille’s “biblical” epic The Ten Commandments (1956) bolstered American
nationalism. Like the narrative prologue opening *The Ten Commandments*, the prologue to *Spartacus* suggests that great themes of empire and civilization are to be addressed. Against Vergil’s description of “golden Rome,” however, appears the image of arid desert and jagged peaks from which thousands of humans, crawling like ants, mine and heave stones.

This scene does not open a biblical epic. Rather, this is a gladiator film. Because gladiator film plots occur in ancient Italy, feature the heroic efforts of an individual, and involve the lives of thousands, critical discussion of these films frequently conflates them with the biblical epic. But the gladiator film genre showcases virility and muscle; frequently, as Mark Jancovich has written, it privileges the gaze upon the male body. Noteworthy of the gladiator film is its low generic standing in relation to the biblical epic. Both types of films, however, have been accused of “thinly veiled” and gratuitous displays of sex. Jancovich, referring to the scholarship of Angela Dalle Vache, writes that both film genres often allow for sexual encounters, justifying the episodes by intoning a message of righteous indignation by film’s end. Following the argument of Barbara Klinger, one might surmise that the privileging of the gaze upon the male body also served to challenge or even subvert the self-righteous pieties of the Eisenhower era and its promotion of the nuclear family. Ultimately, although the biblical epic was touted as appealing to the higher faculties of men’s souls, both epic and gladiator film seemingly pandered to the same audience: middle-brow Americans satisfied with a moral slapped onto the ending.

Complicating this picture of the gladiator movie is the production of *Spartacus*. A “swords and sandals” movie of the “blood, sweat, and spears” genre, *Spartacus* might have been reduced to middle-brow Hollywood stan-

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11Anthony Mann directed this scene in Death Valley.


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Standards, showcasing Douglas’s brawn and co-star Jean Simmons’s beauty as scores of sparsely clad gladiators burn, pillage, and steal what has been denied them. Fast’s novel itself might have suggested an oversimplified telling of the story of Spartacus, for the ostracism and imprisonment which Fast had experienced produced an urgency in his writing. As Carl Hoffman comments, the novel Spartacus contains heavy-handed invocations of Marxism and even paraphrases from the Communist Manifesto. Hoffman also notes that Fast creates, in his depictions of class distinctions, a Manichean divide between his characters: while all Roman patricians are corrupt, Spartacus is impossibly virtuous. In the film, however, as Hoffman observes, Douglas and screenwriter Trumbo create characters of greater complexity. As Peter Ustinov has noted, although Universal Studios distributed the film, it was independently produced by Douglas through Bryna Productions, a company he established and named in honor of his mother, an Eastern European immigrant. As an independent producer, Douglas was free to make executive decisions such as the firing of director Anthony Mann and the hiring of Stanley Kubrick; he also guided the process of scripting the novel.

Kirk Douglas deploys the gladiator movie to subvert the pretensions of the biblical epic as it is used to invoke nationalism. Ricocheting through the film are the themes of racial and social injustice in the Roman Republic, which point to comparable injustices in the 1950s “republic” of the United States. The implicit countering of an American nationalism, joined with the theme of freedom as it has been reproduced in Jewish culture, suggests that nationalism itself is under attack in Spartacus. A stance of “Benevolent Supremacy,” or, as McAlister describes this attitude, empire based upon an ideology of American Christian nationalism, is indeed questioned here in Spartacus, primarily through the foregrounding of themes such as racism and the oppressive power of the state. When Fast wrote Spartacus, he as a member of the CPUSA had already given years of his professional life to fighting racism in the United States. After he had been targeted by HUAC, he used his writing in his defense and against a state power that was not only suspiciously hysterical, but also wrong in its blindness to the endeavors of those unaligned with it politically but who nevertheless hoped that justice might be achieved in this country. While Fast thought in terms of the international proletariat, his concerns in the novel Spartacus were with the inequities here. The film Spartacus, however, reaches

beyond immediate national concerns even as it counters nationalism that demands absolute loyalty. In the film, the scope of the story expands.

This expansion is achieved through an intertextuality that allows audiences to draw varying realms of knowledge to the film. Observing that the boundaries of genre exist to entice transgression of those boundaries, scholar Michael Goldman writes that even Derrida’s work, while acknowledging the “radical instability of genre,” does not adequately recognize that audiences experience drama as an ongoing process and thus influence the determination of generic boundaries.16 Perhaps intuiting audience response and the ongoing nature of the production of meaning, Douglas and Kubrick create a rich intertext for the film. A prevalent reference for the film is German fascism and destruction. Douglas also invokes suggestions of the Israeli fight for independence and relies upon the circulation of cultural and political discourse outside the film to further supply depth of associations. The work of Kubrick visually draws into the film’s discourse the suggestion of another genre, the lamentations of Jewish literature. This intertextuality is important, for it allows for the continuing creation and assignment of meaning to the film by varying audiences. Disturbing the boundaries of the gladiator movie, Douglas, Trumbo, and Kubrick modify the parameters of the gladiator blockbuster and make the film a vehicle for the celebration of peoplehood and the hope of a homeland, and the lamentation for the loss of a people. The artists achieve the subversion of American nationalism by permeating the gladiator film with suggestions of lamentation.

The filmmakers’ concern with an intensifying American nationalism is voiced in the scripting and the delivery of the film’s dialogue. In the tradition of using classically trained British actors to play the roles of Roman patricians, Laurence Olivier was cast as the Roman General Crassus. It is through Crassus that screenwriter Dalton Trumbo speaks the ideology of the Roman elite. This ideology seeks to preserve its position and power—a power, states Crassus, consolidated through five hundred years of Roman history. For both novelist Fast and screenwriter Trumbo, the discourse of the preservation of the imperial state becomes the site of a nexus of associations, the conjunction of a range of human emotion and desire. When Crassus makes a sexual overture to Antoninus, for example, he first frames his proposition in terms of the distinction between morality and pleasure, but he moves to clench his prey by summoning the greatness of Rome, a personification of power with which he

identifies and from whom nothing can be denied. When Crassus later appeals to young Julius Caesar to return to the “equestrian order of the patrician party” in order to fight the mob and re-establish order, he again argues in the name of Rome. Caesar, supporting senator Gracchus’ position of wishing to protect Rome as a republic, tells Crassus that Gracchus is right: “Rome is the mob.” No, responds Crassus, “Rome is an eternal thought in the mind of the gods.” Caesar’s skeptical response, “I thought that you did not believe in the gods,” elicits Crassus’ statement, “If there were no gods, I’d revere them. If there were no Rome, I’d dream of her.”

Thus *Spartacus* is not only the story, as in Fast’s novel, of an international proletariat fighting the capitalistic state that exploits the worker, a story written by an individual member of the CPUSA who has been accused by the state; nor is it limited to a story of slavery and hence, drawing upon the context of Fast’s ongoing concern for the rights of African Americans, of the lack of civil rights in the United States. It is also the story, as foregrounded in Douglas’s film, of a nation hovering between the status of republic and empire. It tells of how the state justifies suppression, slavery, exploitation, and bloodlust, all in the name of an apotheosis of state ideology. Fast had made the novel the story of the revolt of the exploited who were rallied by a man of unique compassion—and in this compassionate defense of the exploited of the world, one finds a Jewish concern. In a complex move complicating Fast’s plot, however, the film captures the moment in history when a political power, once consolidated and unified, begins to experience internal anarchy as the plebeians within its bounds challenge the privilege of class. This moment in itself suggests early twentieth-century European history, when the Hapsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov empires were collapsing. But the filmmakers’ crafting of Crassus’ bid for power as dictator, in the name of an idea of Rome, intimates a more recent history.

When Heinrich Himmler, architect of National Socialism, dreamed of a new nation, he dreamed of an elite guard, an “equestrian order” of a “pure” party that would fight the mob and re-establish order in Germany. Impressed with the hierarchy of the Jesuit order of the Catholic church, Himmler designed a military unit built by strict punishment and discipline, a group he called “the Sons of Light.” In the 1981 British film documentary *The World at War*, narrator Laurence Olivier (an interesting twist) explains that the Nazi drive for

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17 The scene in which Antoninus bathes Crassus was cut from the version released in 1960, but restored in the 2001 DVD.
national order drew upon ancient Germanic myth to create a new order based on the folk culture of Aryan Germany. Olivier describes Himmler’s dream of an elite guard who would contribute to a new awakening of Germanic spirit. Accompanying Olivier’s narrative is the historic film footage showing National Socialist soldiers mounted on horses and garbed as knights, wearing helmets synthesizing the styles of ancient Roman and Germanic helmets. The knights, these “Sons of Light” who represent a “new Germany,” ride in formation as foot soldiers carry both banners emblazoned with swastika and staffs bearing the emblems of the new order.

Visually summoning the accoutrements of fascist power in *Spartacus*, director Stanley Kubrick creates the scene where Crassus addresses Roman troops. His pectoral trimmed in gold, Crassus stands on the Senate steps and looks haughtily upon soldiers immobile in perfect formation. Crassus’ troops, helmeted and armored, hold staffs of insignia and banners symbolizing Roman power. Raising the baton that signifies the glory of Rome, the general commands the salute of “Hail, Crassus!” He then charges Rome’s armies to perform their duty. Crassus states that if they succeed in “the destruction of the slave army,” he “promise[s] . . . a new Rome, a new Italy, a new empire.” The parallels suggested between Roman power and twentieth-century fascism appear elsewhere in the film, and are the visual product of the work of Kubrick. Historian Geoffrey Cocks argues that *The Shining* was the Holocaust film that Stanley Kubrick never made. That is, having voiced the desire to address the Holocaust in film, Kubrick never directly did so. Indirectly, however, his films, and especially *The Shining*, are laced with references to the Holocaust. Cocks observes that *Spartacus* was the “bastard child” that Kubrick disowned, a film with which he was unhappy because he did not exercise the directorial control that he preferred. Even so, *Spartacus*, as a film created by the efforts of those who recognized themselves as Jewish, is remarkable in the scope of its references to the Holocaust.

As Kubrick directs the filming of Draba’s attack of Crassus, he modifies the story, having the general plunge a knife into Draba’s upper back. The spattering of blood upon Crassus’ face suggests documentary description of blood spattering Heinrich Himmler as he watched the Nazis’ methodical shooting of Jews into death camp trenches. In the “Genocide” volume of *The World at War*, producer Michael Darlow has spliced together film footage of Himmler visiting the death camp near Minsk, where Jews and Russian political prison-

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ers were held. The commentary of Karl Wolff, S.S. General and adjutant to Himmler, accompanies both this footage and a still photograph of Himmler standing on the edge of a trench into which Jews were gunned down. Wolff comments that Himmler “had never seen dead people before,” and “asked to see how it was done.” Wolff states, “Himmler . . . got a splash of brains on his coat, and I think that it also splashed onto his face.” As Himmler reeled in revulsion, Wolff had to steady him and help him away from the grave. In the film Spartacus, the scene of the blood spattering Crassus invites comparison of the two military leaders, Himmler and Crassus, spattered by the blood of those whose death they consider entertainment. Furthermore, by visually foregrounding the body of Draba hung from the rafters of the gladiator school, and by having the prisoners file by it on their way to the mess hall, Kubrick suggests the Nazi hanging of prisoners in Auschwitz as described by survivors such as Elie Wiesel. The film further delineates the entrapment and destruction of those who simply wish for freedom: suggesting historic film footage of the Navenna, one of the boats on which Jews attempting to escape Nazi Germany fled, the plot developed by Douglas and Trumbo describes the frustrated attempts of the slaves to escape Italy by sea.

Although “republican” nationalism is questioned in Spartacus, territory as homeland, a refuge for the oppressed, is celebrated. Released in 1960, the same year that the film version of Leon Uris’s Exodus was released, Spartacus repeatedly invokes the theme of a homeland to be reached by sea. Although Spartacus was Thracian, not Jewish, and his followers from many peoples, the film invites the comparison to a territorial Zionism, the return to the land from a company of peoples dispersed throughout the world. This suggestion of the possibility of a peaceful and productive life in a homeland also appears in Douglas’s inclusion of agrarian scenes of women and children spinning, weaving, cooking, and in Kubrick’s filming of the merrymaking and dancing of Spartacus’ followers after initial victory in battle. Douglas, working in the aftermath of the establishment of the State of Israel and the Sinai Campaign in 1956, was keenly aware of the new nation.

But as Crassus crushes the slave army and executes the six thousand survivors along the Appian Way, a new homeland is not to be realized by the slaves in Spartacus. In a scene that some viewers found shocking in 1960 but which has since earned the praise of critics, Kubrick, calling upon designer Saul Bass for his expertise, creates a picture of the slaughter of thousands of people who had been portrayed as happily living together, working together in freely given relationship. Suggesting the series of catastrophes experienced by the Jewish people and culminating in the Holocaust, this scene also suggests the lamentation of a people. Traditional Jewish responses to catastrophe,
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writes David Roskies, paradoxically affirm the continuity of life for the Jewish people.\(^{20}\) For “Jews of eastern Europe schooled in the exercises of collective memory,” Roskies writes, the “greater the catastrophe, the more the Jews have called upon the ancient archetypes,” such as the Akedah, the story of Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac as a sacrifice.\(^{21}\) Like Roskies, scholar Alan Mintz discusses the endurance of the Akedah in traditional Hebrew literary responses to catastrophe. Mintz further discusses the recent synthesis of traditional tropes with modern techniques introduced by media such as film.\(^{22}\) One such technique is visual metonymy that lends itself well to the representation, through a single image, of the gross destruction and irreconcilable loss occurring in battle between thousands. Describing the poetry of Abba Kovner, a Jewish partisan who led resistance against the Nazis from forests near Vilna, Mintz states that Kovner’s writing “radically metonymizes” images of catastrophe.\(^{23}\) “Thus, in Kovner’s poetry, ‘the thousands’ are the Jews, ‘he’ is the Nazi, and the partisan who escaped is called ‘the one.’”\(^{24}\) Metonymic images suggesting the literature of lamentation permeate *Spartacus*. The slow panning shots of the dead on the battlefield, the picture of the lifeless mother’s corpse cradling her dead infant, the image of an elderly coupled holding one another in death: through these images, Kubrick and designer Saul Bass create a sense of lamentation over the loss of community and loss of land as locus for community.

“I am Spartacus”

Reverberating through ranks of shackled rebels, these three words constitute the identity announced by six thousand slaves attempting to save their leader from death. As the Thracian gladiator has freed slaves from the *latisfundia*, they join him to free others and to fight to the shores of Brundusium and

\(^{20}\)David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), pp. 19, 7. (First published by Harvard University Press, 1984.)  
\(^{21}\)Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, p. 13.  
\(^{24}\)Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 702.
hence to the boats for freedom. But the film storyline disrupts their flight: in a bid for power in the Roman Republic, the general Crassus orders the entrapment of Spartacus and his followers by Roman armies approaching from the north, south, and east. Betrayed by the pirates and unable to flee, the rebels face Crassus and are crushed. The six thousand who survive are shackled. Defeated in battle, their comrades and families destroyed, the six thousand men whom the Romans have chained choose to identify with Spartacus.

The location of the moment of identification is crucial to the interpretation of the film. The final battle scene, preceding the scene in which all of the chained slaves proclaim “I am Spartacus,” metonymizes the death of a people—a “company” of peoples, as Fast describes those once enslaved but now following Spartacus. The scene, designed by Saul Bass, shows the slaughter of families, the slaughter of a community: heaped upon each other, dead mothers’ bodies are wrenched in positions suggesting that they were trying to protect the children who lie dead beside them. Old men and women and dwarf and infant: all have been massacred by the Romans. Having entrapped those who simply wished to leave the shores of Italy for a homeland elsewhere, the self-righteous of a corrupt republic slaughter them mercilessly. The parallels to Jewish experience in Europe are haunting, as is the metonymy suggesting genocide.

But the scene of slaughter is neither the final scene in the film nor the recognition scene. Seeing their community destroyed does not prompt the recognition of defeat. Nor does it prompt a recognition of the greatness of Crassus or Rome. Rather, the scene immediately following the battle scene, the moment where the remaining rebels are shackled together and are commanded to identify Spartacus, is the ultimate scene of recognition in the film. By caring for slaves and gladiators, by reciting narratives that encourage them, by refusing to destroy, as the Romans do, for the pleasure of destroying: in these ways Spartacus not only has won the loyalty of the slaves but also has instilled the sense of working together as brothers for the common goal of freedom. Prom-

25 What a company they were, Gauls and Jews and Greeks and Egyptians, Thracians and Nubians and Sudanese and Libyans, Persians and Assyrians and Samaritans, Germans and Slavs, Bulgars and Macedonians and Spaniards and many an Italian too . . . , Sabines and Umbrians and Tuscan and Sicilians and folk of many other tribes whose very names are lost forever, a singular company of blood and nations but united first in their bondage and now in their freedom.” See Spartacus, pp. 168–169.

ising that all but Spartacus will be allowed to live as slaves, Crassus orders the slaves to identify Spartacus for execution. They refuse, each assuming the name Spartacus to protect this man whom they love. As they identify with Spartacus, they recognize their unity with him. Now, facing death, the slaves perform a belief that identity as brothers is more important than life. But their ruse to protect Spartacus fails: ultimately, all are murdered in retribution. The final words of the film, Varinia’s promise to Spartacus that their son is “free,” are countered by the executions of six thousand comrades lining the Appian Way.

Finally, in a complex association of imagery, the filmmakers evoke the Holocaust by suggesting the archetype of the Akedah. As Alan Mintz observes, the Akedah figured in Hebrew literature lamenting the loss of homeland and people. Furthermore, the meanings assigned to the Akedah shifted historically: after the Crusades, and especially with the martyrdom chosen by six hundred Jews in Mainz in 1648, the invocation of the Akedah suggested that those tested were worthy. In the denouement of the film, after the moment when the six thousand rebels identify themselves as Spartacus, Trumbo and Douglas interpose a scene recalling the Akedah. Crassus, spurned by Spartacus’ wife Varinia, orders Spartacus and Antoninus to fight to the death. Knowing that the winner must face a painful and prolonged death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, each man vows to win the gladiatorial match. Telling Antoninus that he has loved him as a father loves his son, Spartacus stabs the youth to spare him worse suffering. In this closed system of destruction designed by the Romans, no divine hand stays Spartacus and no ram is caught in the thicket to substitute for Antoninus. Choosing to spare Antoninus the greater suffering, Spartacus accepts for himself the more prolonged, painful death. There is no hope of redemption.

But there is a sliver of light suggesting the slight bestowment of freedom. The hope offered in the film, the hope of freedom, lies not in the impermissur of Rome granting freedom to Varinia; it lies in the mutual identification of all of the slaves metonymically figured in Spartacus’ comrade, Antoninus. Spartacus promises the Roman general Crassus that the dead Antoninus “will return and he will be millions.” If, as Michael Goldman cites Nietzsche, the ultimate recognition scene is return from the dead, then this is the promise of

that return and that recognition. Those subjected to the tyranny of a Rome professing its republican virtues, suggests Spartacus, will return as the masses and will rise up against the tyrants. Likewise, the film obliquely suggests, those crushed by the politically powerful, whether unjust white supremacists or the powerful of HUAC or fascist Europe, will return as the masses and will rise up. The oppressed will fight for justice. More importantly, those like Spartacus who identify with the oppressed will, through memory, enable the dead to live.

In 2008 c.e., at the close of an era of European history that was deadly for its Jewish population, scholars and critics are scrutinizing the cultural productions of those who have willingly identified themselves as Jewish. As never before, evidence for “Jewishness” in novels and films is discussed and debated as those who consider themselves Jewish ponder the murderous rage loosed upon them, and those who come from other cultural milieux realize the preciousness of Jewish life and Jewish vision for humanity. Most remarkable in that vision, perhaps, is the willingness to fight ideology and to struggle physically for the well-being of those whose value is denied. Recognizing the value of freedom, drawing from thousands of years of literature of sorrow, Fast, Douglas, Trumbo, and Kubrick metonymically invoke images of the Holocaust to create an unusual film of lamentation. Offering an identity with the oppressed, they perform an understanding of Jewish identity.

Additional Sources


Footnote

28Goldman, On Drama, p. 113.


