
In his editor’s Introduction Winkler rightly stresses the great impact the 1960 film had on Spartacus’ image in our time: “Kubrick’s film became the legend’s most popular restatement in the second half of the twentieth century”. (2) I would add that the 1960 film did what Saurin’s tragedy of 1760 meant for the audience of his days and Giovagnoli’s novel of 1874 to a worldwide readership around 1900. Winkler points out that Spartacus was not a one man’s film, neither of Kubrick nor Douglas. Many people had a hand in the production process and numerous forces behind the scenes determined what finally appeared on the screen. For instance, the unforgettable opening scenes, from Spartacus labouring in the Libyan quarries to the arrival and start of training in the gladiator’s school of Lentulus Battiatus in Capua, were directed by Anthony Mann (3). However, Mann was never credited for his contribution. Stanley Kubrick, the official director, was only 31 at the time. He could not identify himself with the result. Consistently he has disowned ‘his’ Spartacus, quite different from his other films (4). With these remarks Winkler wets our appetite: this collection of papers may indeed help to reach the new assessment of the film he promises (9).

It opens with two papers by Duncan Cooper that are revised and updated versions of articles earlier published in the journal Cinéaste: “Who Killed the Legend of Spartacus? Production, Censorship, and Reconstruction of Stanley Kubrick’s Epic Film” and “Dalton Trumbo vs. Stanley Kubrick: The Historical Meaning of Spartacus”. They present many fascinating details about the production process of the film. In this way the inconsistencies both in the story and the message become understandable. At different stages various people with conflicting views on the message of the film gave their turn to the production: Dalton Trumbo, Howard Fast, Stanley Kubrick, the executive producer Kirk Douglas and the bosses of Universal Studios. Scenes were recorded, but never used. Other scenes were cut or shortened. This reshuffling went on till the final stages of the production process. The restored version of 1991 has only five minutes of additions, for Universal had destroyed most material in 1975. That is the reason why so many people did not recognize themselves in the final result. The modern spectator is puzzled by dialogues that refer to events he never saw. The political intrigues in Rome, in which Gracchus (Charles Laughton) and young Julius Caesar (John Gavin) are involved have become incomprehensible. The triumphal entry by the slaves in Metapontum celebrates a victory never shown or even referred to (33). Kubrick had wished to have several battles, but he only succeeded in having one, the heroic defeat of Spartacus (18). This spectacular battle, one of the highlights of the film, was only recorded later in Spain, where Franco’s army acted as inexpensive material.
Some of the changes have to be understood against the background of the political climate. Conservative forces such as the American Legion were still vociferous, although the worst days of McCarthy were over. But Universal, which saw an intimate film costing three to four million dollars grown into a spectacular film of twelve million dollars, was anxious not to offend the American public. Some cuts included gory shots of arms, legs, and heads being cut off in battle, a lengthy scene of a man being drowned in a pot of soup, a shot of blood spurting onto the Roman aristocrat Crassus’ face and a seduction scene between Crassus and his slave Antoninus, the notorious ‘oyster and snails’ scene (15). These were left out to meet the objections of the Catholic censors.

In the light of all these handicaps it is something of a miracle that a film resulted of such a great appeal. The success is due to the numerous strong scenes like Spartacus’ toil in Libya, the training of the gladiators, the fight between Spartacus and black gladiator Draba, the escape from the kitchen, Spartacus’ Christ-like speech on the mountain (with cross-overs to Crassus addressing the Romans), the final battle and the famous ‘I am Spartacus. I am Spartacus’ scene. These pictures even now make a deep impression on a young public, as I found out showing my personal cut of the film to students, reducing the three hours and fifteen minutes to a manageable half an hour.

In this way it becomes clear how insignificant the—indeed messy—story is. Kubrick was right when he said about the film: “It had everything but a good story”. I am not as sure as Cooper is that the film would have much improved if Dalton Trumbo, who wrote the screenplay, had had his way: he advocated a ‘Large Spartacus’ with an outspoken revolutionary character.

Cooper lists Spartacus’ qualities as being these: the superb acting of Laurence Olivier, Charles Laughton, and Peter Ustinov; the moving scenes written by Dalton Trumbo, spectacular camera work by Russell Metty, stirring music by Alex North, and the direction of Stanley Kubrick. “These elements, combined with Fast’s heroic theme of mankind’s age-old quest for freedom, make Spartacus a powerful and moving historical epic” (16).

Its huge success is also due to a political climate becoming sensitive to left-wing themes (14). The newly elected president John F. Kennedy endorsed the film ignoring the action of the American Legion. He crossed the picket line and watched the film in a Washington cinema.

In the third paper “Spartacus, Exodus, and Dalton Trumbo: Managing Ideologies of War” Fredrick Ahl demonstrates the similarities between the film about the slaves rebellion and the migration of Jews to the country they regard as promised to them. Trumbo, who also wrote the screenplay for this film, had to compromise his pacifist views. Ahl sees “a disappointed idealism underlying Trumbo’s script for Spartacus” (85).